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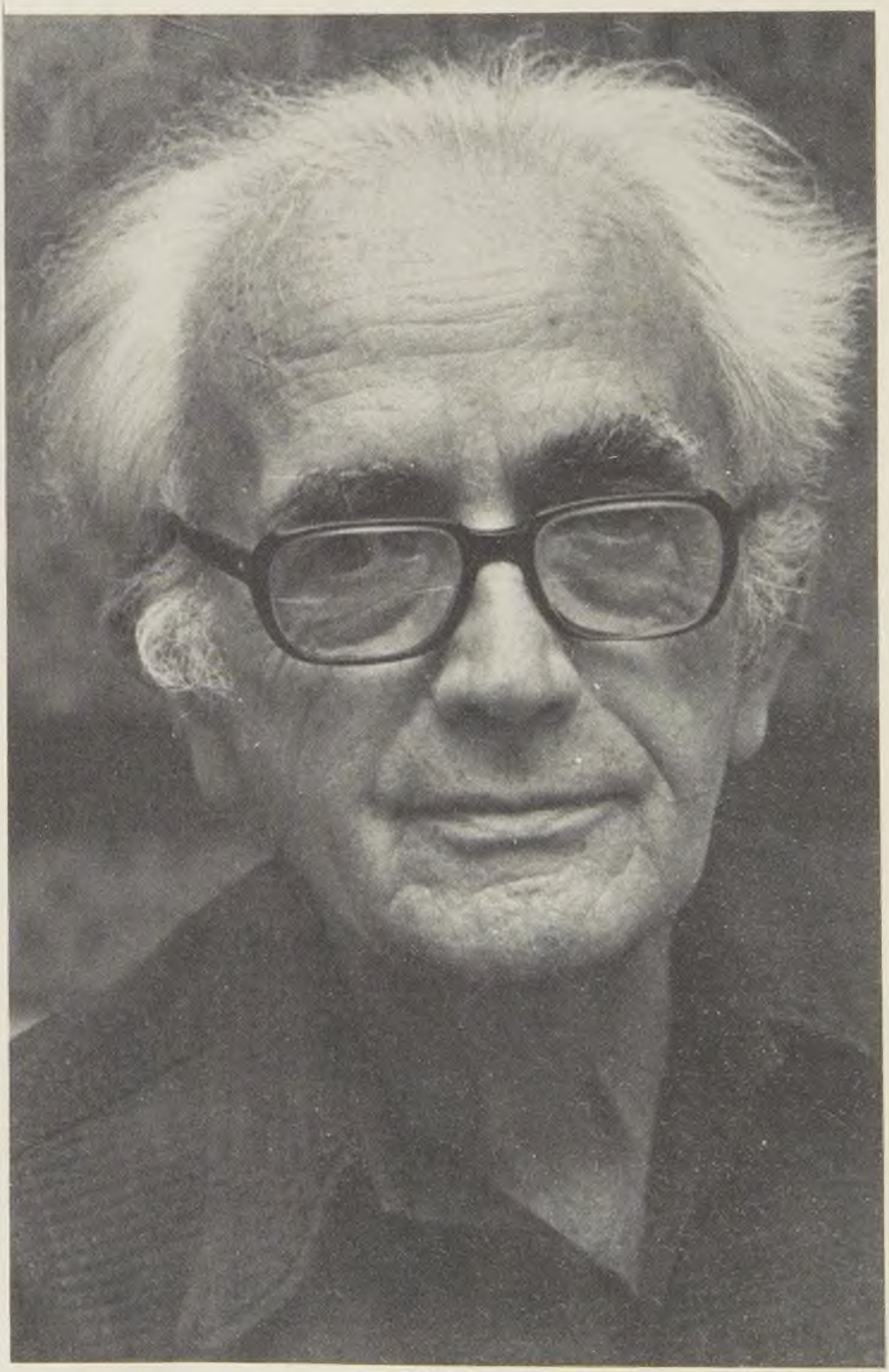
The Gregg Press
Science Fiction Series

David G. Hartwell, *Editor*

Night's Black Agents
by Fritz Leiber



Night's Black Agents

Fritz Leiber

With a New Introduction by
RICHARD GID POWERS

Gregg Press

A DIVISION OF G. K. HALL & CO., BOSTON, 1980

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Printed on permanent/durable acid-free paper and bound in the United States of America.

Republished in 1980 by Gregg Press, A Division of G.K. Hall & Co., 70 Lincoln St., Boston, Massachusetts 02111

First Printing, September, 1980

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Leiber, Fritz, 1910-
Night's black agents.

(The Gregg Press science fiction series)
Reprint of the ed. published by Berkley Pub. Corp., New York.
CONTENTS: Ancient adventures: The sunken land. Adept's gambit.—Transition: The man who never grew young.—Modern horrors: Smoke ghost.—[etc.]
1. Horror tales, American. 2. Fantastic fiction, American. I. Title. II. Series: Gregg Press science fiction series.
PZ3.L5293Ni 1980 [PS3523.E4583] 813'.54 80-17010
ISBN 0-8398-2640-0

Introduction

When Fritz Leiber talks about fantasy people listen. For 40 years he has been a leader in the field—first as a pioneer, later as a master, always as an innovator who discovers suspected possibilities within the boundaries of sword-and-sorcery and supernatural horror—and expands those boundaries. "The occult," he writes in "A Bit of the Dark World," "—very much like stories of supernatural horror—is a sort of game Most religions too. Believe in the game and accept its rules—or the premises of the story—and you can have the thrills or whatever it is you're after" (p. 261). That's sword and sorcery. But there is more: there is also "the kind of horror—and wonder too, perhaps—that lies beyond any game, that's bigger than any game, that's fettered by no rules, conforms to no manmade theology, bows to no charms or protective rituals, that strides the world unseen and strikes without warning where it will, much the same as (though it's of a different order of existence than all of these) lightning or the plague or the enemy atom bomb. The sort of horror that the whole fabric of civilization was designed to protect us from and make us forget. The horror about which all man's learning tells us nothing" (pp. 261-262). And there you have supernatural horror, the kind of writing that is also called weird fiction.

There may be other ways of understanding the fundamental nature of sword-and-sorcery and weird fiction and the difference between them but Leiber's way works for him. It

works so well because in isolating the similarity between fantasy literature and games like chess he has put his finger on the reason this kind of writing—and these kind of games—are so fascinating. Nearly every story Leiber writes—and nearly every story in *Night's Black Agents*—makes use of his insight into the gameplaying aspect of fantasy.

All but the last two stories in this Gregg Press volume of *Night's Black Agents* appeared in the 1947 Arkham Press edition—an edition, by the way, that was a high honor for a writer like Leiber who was a devoted admirer of H. P Lovecraft. Arkham House was founded to preserve the memory and promote the works of Lovecraft. Publication of *Night's Black Agents* meant that August Derleth thought Leiber's stories were a significant contribution to the Lovecraft legacy. The last two stories in this volume—"**The Girl with the Hungry Eyes**" and "**A Bit of the Dark World**"—were added when Berkley reissued the collection in 1978 to represent some of the new territory Leiber had covered since 1947.

Leiber was born on December 24, 1910, and after graduating from the University of Chicago (starting in chemistry he shifted to math, then psychology, philosophy, and finally theology—"a quaintly precise trending from the material to the insubstantial,"[1] Leiber called his college career) he moved to New York City where he attended Divinity School and worked for a short time as an assistant minister in New Jersey before committing himself to editing and writing. Leiber's hobbies—fencing, mythology, chess, bridge, and rock climbing are all strongly in evidence in his fantasy writing. Of course, like everyone else who wrote for the pulps Leiber was much influenced by the competition—and by the editors whose favorite formulas determined the sorts of stories written and submitted. "**The Automatic Pistol**," for instance, was exactly the kind of crime story with a weird wrinkle that backed up the feature novel in *The Shadow Magazine*. Subtract the weird gimmick—in this story the supernatural element is little more than a plot gimmick—and you have a James M. Cain story. "**The Inheritance**" is another story of the type that regularly appeared in the adventure pulps, but in this case the supernatural element is intrinsic to the plot and tone. This is not a major story in either the weird or detective story tradition, but it does showcase the sort of plot treatment that had an irresistible attraction for Leiber. All formula plots are predictable, but convention usually encour-

ages the reader to push the foreseen conclusion to the rear of his consciousness. Leiber transforms almost any formula plot into supernatural horror by keeping both the conclusion and every step leading to the horrific finale fully before the reader's consciousness—thus giving it the foreseen yet irresistible character of nightmare. I suspect that the psychological effect of weird fiction is partly due to the nightmarish sense of helplessness produced when an event is foreseen without this knowledge being able to hasten, slow or prevent the outcome.

"The Inheritance" employs one of fantasy literature's most basic plot devices: the notion that objects absorb some of the reality and some of the dreams of the persons who use them. In this case a young man inherits a policeman uncle's apartment and belongings: soon he begins to have visions of a series of crime his uncle investigated, crimes his uncle in fact committed. His uncle's uniform, press clippings and bed produce in him the sense of *being* his uncle; this feeling leads him to attempt a murder that had been planned by his uncle before his death. But while his body is possessed by his uncle's will, his mind, in an out-of-body experience, tracks down his killer inhabited body and, by an act of will, recaptures his body before it can commit another of his uncle's murders.

"**Adept's Gambit**" was the first Fafhrd-Gray Mouser story Fritz Leiber ever wrote. He started on it in the autumn of 1935 and finished it early in 1936, though it lay unpublished until Arkham House included it in *Night's Black Agents* in 1947. It is the only story in Leiber's Nehwon Saga to take place in historical times and lands. Because Leiber never again gave his sword-and sorcery this sort of setting, the story can be regarded, in this respect only, as a false start (though it was also, obviously, a most promising beginning for what has become one of fantasy's most successful heroic series).

The story now stands in The Third Book of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, *Swords in the Mist* (1968, Gregg Press edition, 1977). There it is introduced by a story called "The Wrong Branch" that explains how the two heroes turned up in Asia Minor at the time of the Seleucids, during the Hellenistic period. In this very short story the two quasi-heroes venture down a wrong corridor in Ningauble's cave, on the way to an audience with the magician, a corridor that leads out of Neh

won and into an alternative time and space—the Eastern Mediterranean at the aforementioned time in history. In a talk delivered in 1962, Leiber wrote

> I want to state categorically that the cavern of Ningauble has obscure space-time linkages—perhaps some sort of seven fold warps—which permit Fafhrd and the Mouser to adventure occasionally in other worlds than that of Nehwon [2]

Though Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser pass through the tunnel into historical space-time only once (and there is no record of how they returned), several other travelers enter Nehwon from Europe's early history and myth. In *The Swords of Lankhmar* (1968, Gregg Press edition, 1977) a German from "Tomorrow" named Karl Treuherz ventures into Nehwon in a "space-time engine" in search of "mythical" monsters for a zoo called Hagenbeck's Tiergarten Treuherz communicates with Fafhrd and the Mouser with the aid of a German Lankhmarese dictionary. In the "Rime Isle" episode of *Swords and Ice Magic* (1977; Gregg Press edition, 1977) Odin and Loki, abandoned by their earthly worshippers, visit Nehwon and take possession of the bodies of Fafhrd and the Mouser, respectively, for the duration of a single adventure.

Leiber would go on to write better stories than "Adept's Gambit," but he would never top that story's lead sentence:

> It happened that while Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser were dallying in a wine shop near the Sidonian Harbor of Tyre, where all wine shops are of doubtful repute, a long limbed yellow haired Galatian girl lolling in Fafhrd's lap turned suddenly into a whallopingly large sow It was a singular occurrence, even in Tyre. (p 21)

Just try to stop reading after that! The plot is an intricate interplay of moves and countermoves (hence the chess-derived title); the opponents are Ningauble of the Seven Eyes (later to become Fafhrd's tutelary wizard) and a deranged sorcerer named Anra Devadoris. Fafhrd and the Mouser are the chessmen the wizards use to advance towards their goals, to parry each other's thrusts, and to offer in sacrifice to attain positional advantage. Anra's magic enables him to exchange bodies with his sister, using her as his tool while his own body lies in the safety of a tomb, his heart, brain and other vital organs secreted in even more secure refuges. Anra Devadoris' motive in bewitching Fafhrd's girls ("pig trickery")

is to lure the adventurers into his lair. He wants to steal their gift of laughter, for he himself had paid for his occult powers by losing this gift and all that it symbolizes—and what it symbolizes, Anra tells them,

> is something in the inmost core of you, something that you, or others before you, have close-guarded down the ages. Something that lets you laugh in a way that only the Elder Gods have ever laughed. Something that makes you see a kind of jest in horror and disillusionment and death. There is much wisdom to be gained by the unravelling of that something. (p. 53)

Laughter seems to be a sign of Fafhrd and the Mouser's ability to live in the present and to experience the full richness of the moment. Laughter is an emblem of their "nowness," their ability to throw themselves fully into the pleasure of what they are doing instead of devaluing the present, treating it as a means toward an end in the future—precisely what their opponents in the sorcery set do. The adepts gain power over life at the price of separating themselves from life. Anra's sister says of her brother that "though he possessed my body, he could not use it easily and bravely as I had. He could not laugh, love or dare. He must instead hang back, peer, purse his lips, withdraw" (p. 89).

Fafhrd and the Mouser become pawns in a complicated struggle between the two sourcerers when Ningauble, instead of simply advising them how to find Anra, makes them earn his aid by procuring magical supplies and information he has long craved. Only when they have performed the tasks assigned them are they permitted to reach Anra.

To Ningauble's surprise Fafhrd and the Mouser survive his strategic gambit (the sacrifice of a chess piece for later advantage), and with the aid of divine laughter and Anra's rebellious twin sister they destroy Anra and escape. In the end it is their refusal to take themselves seriously that saves them. Their characteristic light heartedness is evidently related to a philosophy Leiber calls Chaoticism. "The Only God is Chaos and Chaos is his prophet." Fafhrd and the Mouser occasionally serve lesser gods, but their allegience to the God of Chaos is the source of their strength during their long and adventuresome careers.

"Adept's Gambit"'s historical setting was a false start. By the time the story was published in 1947 Leiber had firmly situated his heroes in the fantastic world of Nehwon. Actu-

ally, when Harry Otto Fischer first described Fafhrd and the Mouser to Leiber in his by-now well-known letter of September, 1934, he said that they were located in "Lankh mar...built on the edge of the Great Salt Marsh" (p. xii). Why, then, did Leiber not use Lankhmar as a setting for the first story based on Fischer's idea? The answer may have been that Leiber—not yet a professional or even a would-be professional author—had been having some success getting "Biblical fantasies" published in a magazine called *The Churchman* edited by the minister he was assisting in Highland Park, New Jersey, Rev. Ernest ("Beezie") W. Mandeville,[4] and this success may have suggested to Leiber that a Biblical setting could help get the story published.

Once "Adept's Gambit" was finished, however, Leiber submitted it to Farnsworth Wright at *Weird Tales*, who rejected it. Wright passed it on to H. P. Lovecraft who thought highly of the story. Lovecraft did suggest some modifications (chiefly in the area of including references to the Cthulhu mythos), but in his favorable review, there was once almost unnoticable qualification. "Adept's Gambit," Lovecraft wrote, "is laid in Syria of the early Hellenistic period, *but* [emphasis added] soon moves away from Tyre and Ephesus to a fabulous mountain realm of inland Asia."[5] This "but" may have been a very persuasive conjunction to Leiber.

The vast majority of Leiber's readers (I among them) evidently approved of his abandoning historical settings in the Fafhrd and Gray Mouser stories. Reference to historical persons, places and events demands that these references somehow be made relevant to the story, that Leiber's mythological imagination be tied down to the record of history, the facts of geography and, ultimately, to the debilitating "myth" of probability. To hell with all that!

What obviously was *not* a false start in "Adept's Gambit" was Leiber's characterization of the two heroes, with their personalities based on whimsical analogies to the character of Fischer (Fafhrd, "A somewhat regulation hero," according to Leiber, somewhat reminiscent of Odin) and Leiber himself (The Gray Mouser, with "faint similarities to Loki, Peer Gynt, François Villon, Etael Andergast in Wassermann's *Kerkhoven* trilogy, Spendius in Flaubert's *Salammbo*, Jurgen himself and Horvendile in *The Cream of the*

Jest, even the Pied Piper of Hamlin and Punch as a young man.")[n]

Leiber was clearly onto something with the characterizations of his two heroes; he was also onto something with the type of plot he created for his two heroes. These plots were not merely, as has already been pointed out, conceived of as games, but as particular types of games: problems, or puzzles, in which the given situation is so patterned that only one solution exists within the structure of the rules. If the rules of the game—chess perhaps—give structure to the fantasy universe, then the description of the problem—a challenge to discover a mate in two moves, for instance—doubly structures it.

From the very start Leiber and Fischer thought of Lankhmar as a game environment, and they created a game version of the at the same time they were putting down their ideas for the first stories. Recently (1976) Lankhmar was turned into a modern fantasy wargame by Gary Gygax, founder of TSR Hobbies and inventor of *Dungeons and Dragons*, the first fantasy role playing wargame. Leiber says that the game that he and Fischer invented back in the '30s was "more like chess; it had no role-playing element, just the fantasy trappings." It was after Gygax (who Leiber says "was soaked in S & S stories. Robert E. Howard's Conan tales probably loomed largest in his mind, but all were drawn on, contributed") had invented *Dungeons and Dragons* that Leiber told him about his earlier game. Gygax "adapted it to modern wargame conventions" and published it as *Lankhmar*; Leiber and Fischer have lately been going to wargame conventions and spending "some happy time autographing rule booklets and touring fans through the land of Lankhmar."

"**The Sunken Land**" is a fairly early Fafhrd-Gray Mouser story—first published in the pulps in 1942. Its plot—like that of "Adept's Gambit," is a game. Fafhrd shoots a fish which has a key-ring (shades of Captain Midnight!) in its gut. Then Fafhrd is captured by a war galley under the command of a mad, drunken pirate who leads the ship in an assault on the legendary sunken city of Simorgya. They sight the seaweed draped land, penetrate to its heart, and unlock its treasure chamber with Fafhrd's ring. At that moment Fafhrd has a sudden insight that saves his life, and he races from the palace just before the now freed monster of the island, a liv-

ing, man-devouring, Lovecraftian creature, seized the victims it has lured into its grasp.

Then he realized—and the realization came with an impact like a rushing wall of water that nothing had happened accidentally, that everything from the moment his arrow had struck the fish, had been intended for someone or something—something that wanted a door unlocked. (p.17)

There, in a nutshell, is the reason Leiber's sword-and-sorcery is so popular. All barbaric fantasy appeals to the anarchic desire for freedom, but Leiber discovered a formula for heightening the sense of liberation his readers seek Fafhrd and the Mouser are by nature free spirits, but in each episode they have to earn their freedom once again. Double liberation—and double satisfaction.

Leiber's conception of sword-and-sorcery as a game fits into his overall approach towards fantasy. First of all, Fafhrd and the Mouser are unique within Leiber's sword-and-sorcery in that they are not totally caught up in game playing. They derive their power from the chaos Leiber tells us lurks just off the gameboard. Let that Chaos intrude onto the board and the result is supernatural horror.

Leiber's supernatural horror is very much the record of the ways repressed reality intrudes into the games people play. "**The Dreams of Albert Moreland**" literally is a story about a game played to keep horror at bay. Each night an aged chess master has to play a weird chess game in his dreams, a game whose rules are cloaked in mystery, whose chess pieces are stylizations of warriors and monsters not of earthly origin. And the stakes—"unwholesome to contemplate"—may include not only his own soul but *our* fates as well. Leiber writes that

"The Dreams of Albert Moreland" isn't strictly a scenario for a wargame, although the connection is important In a way it goes a step farther than "Smoke Ghost" or "The Hound"—not just the horror and dark beauty of modern industrial mega-cities, but a vision of something rotten, or at least something dark and enigmatic, but questionable, built into the heart of reality It *is* a prevision of the games playing world of today, the looming everywhere of the games metaphor.[5]

In many of Leiber's weird stories the "games metaphor" is reduced to a gesture—the ordinary routines of social life and work—the surveyor's trade in "**The Hill and the Hole**"—or modern urban culture, which

> is ripe for infection From somewhere It's just like a bacteriologist's culture I didn't intend the pun—when it gets to the right temperature and consistency for supporting a colony of germs Similarly, our culture suddenly spawns a hoard of demons. And, like germs, they have a peculiar affinity for our culture. They're unique. They fit in. You wouldn't find the same kind any other time or place. (p.191)

When horror finally breaks through the gameplayer's defenses, it is a horror uniquely adapted to his own fears. In "**The Hound**" David Lashley "knew that before him crouched the monster of his dreams, finally made flesh and blood" (p. 197). In "**Diary in the Snow**" (really a science fiction tale) the intrusion from the realm of nightmare is an alien invasion from outer space via radio waves The fantasy aspect of the story is the way the aliens "mold" the consciousness of their human receptor by persuading him, via telepathic urging, to write a science fiction story describing just such an invasion. In that way he comes to "will" the invasion, which is all the aliens need. In this way his dreams attain the status of reality, which is the essence of fantasy.

> How long this moment had been anticipated! How many eons had been spent waiting for the emergence of sufficiently intelligent animals on that faraway planet and their development of adequate radiation excitors—maddeningly slow processes even without telepathic urging! How long, too, at the end, it had taken to select and mold one of the bipeds into a suitably sensitive subject! Conditions were right for the establishment of that delicate admixture of physical and mental radiations which opened the door between the stars and built the web across cosmic chasms (p. 222)

Here is a truly demonic notion—that nightmares are open paths that unearthly creatures can use to invade our lives.

Plenty of people have thought there is something horrible about advertising. In "The Girl with the Hungry Eyes" Leiber turns that something into supernatural horror. One of Jung's notions was that the pin-up girl, the movie sex

symbol, the masturbatory fantasy and, yes, the T and A girl in the T and A ad are all blank screens upon which the mind projects a universalized "anima," the feminine and repressed side of the male personality. In Jungian therapy a union with the anima is an essential step toward self-integration. Advertising takes control of the anima and uses it to direct the public's psychic energy towards consuming. Thus the advertiser denies the public the possibility of authentic self-integration by making his product a substitute for our spiritual fulfillment. Something else: Leiber's true-to the-spirit exaggeration of the dynamics of advertising suggests that the advertiser and the fantasy writer are the black and white magicians of dreams. Advertising is a corrupted and corrupting sub category of fantasy fiction, a craft that turns the manipulation of dreams to private profit.

Many readers will react to "**The Man Who Never Grew Young**" as a remarkable foreshadowing of mainstream stories like *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) and *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) whose characters recoil from modern horrors by taking refuge in a reverse flow of time. The story, a rewinding of history from the atomic present back to a primordial past, attains the solidity of legend because, like all good fantasy stories, it is as much *about* the workings of fantasy as it is a story that provides readers with the sort of experience it describes. In all fantasy tales the author transports the reader to an imagined world where the laws of nature are replaced by the psychological mechanisms of wish fulfillment or, conversely, a world where the ego is stripped of the defense mechanisms the waking mind uses to hold its fears at bay. Leiber's best fantasy stories, like "The Man Who Never Grew Young" and "The Girl with the Hungry Eyes" do not just tell fantastic yarns. They are also explorations of the nature of fantasy—and why we crave it.

The secret of every long career in the arts, wrote Viollet-le-Duc, the grand theorist of the French Gothic Revival, is a continual return to the well-springs of all creativity, "the primitive." Fritz Leiber's secret is that he has never forgotten fantasy's roots in the primitive strivings of the dream life. And so his work has never lost its power to excite and to startle. And it never will.

Richard Gid Powers
Brooklyn, New York

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For a general biographical, bibliographical and critical introduction to Fritz Leiber, see the entry under his name in Peter Nichols (ed.), *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia* (Garden City, Doubleday, 1979), pp. 348-9.

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2. Quoted in "Introduction to Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser," p. xiv.
3. "Introduction to Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser," p. x.
4. "Introduction to Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser," p. xx.
5. Quoted in the "Author's Forward" to Fritz Leiber, *Swords in the Mist* (Boston: Gregg, 1977), p. 2.
6. "Introduction to Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser," p. xii.
7. Fritz Leiber, letter to the author, May 3, 1980.
8. Fritz Leiber, letter to the author, May 3, 1980.

Publishing History of *Night's Black Agents*

Source: Al Lewis, "Fritz Leiber, a Bibliography," in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* (July, 1969), pp. 63-68.

Night's Black Agents was first published by Arkham House, Sauk City, Wisconsin, 1947. This edition contained the following stories:

1. "The Sunken Land," from *Unknown Worlds*, February, 1942.
2. "Adept's Gambit," original in *Night's Black Agents*.
3. "The Man Who Never Grew Young," original in *Night's Black Agents*.
4. "Smoke Ghost," from *Unknown*, October, 1941.
5. "The Automatic Pistol," from *Weird Tales*, May, 1940.
6. "The Inheritance," first published as "The Phantom Slaver" in *Weird Tales*, January, 1942.
7. "The Hill and the Hole," from *Unknown Worlds*, August, 1942.
8. "The Dreams of Albert Moreland," original in *Night's Black Agents*.
9. "The Hound," from *Weird Tales*, November, 1942.
10. "The Diary in the Snow," original in *Night's Black Agents*.

When Berkley reissued *Night's Black Agents* in 1978, Editor David G. Hartwell added the remaining two stories:

11. "The Girl with the Hungry Eyes," from an anthology also titled *The Girl with the Hungry Eyes* (New York: Avon, 1949).
12. "Bit of the Dark World," from *Fantastic*, February, 1962.

For Jonquil

My Wife

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Foreword

The section of this book subtitled *Ancient Adventures* has a history.

More than ten years ago I opened a letter from Harry Fischer, wondering what strange conceit was now in store. The Elder Gods had been pretty well worked through. Even the overweening Wischmeiers, destined to be immortalized by a more trenchant pen, were temporarily exhausted.

Sandwiched in the many pages of text, I came upon the following fragment:

"For all do fear the one known as the Gray Mouser. He walks with swagger 'mongst the bravos, though he's but the stature of a child. His costume is all of gray, from gauntlets to boots and spurs of steel. His flat, swart face is shadowed by a peaked cap of mouse-skin and his garments are of silk, strangely soft and coarse of weave. His weapons: one called Cat's Claw, for it kills in the dark unerringly, and his longer sword, curved up, he terms the Scalpel, for it lets the heart's blood as neatly as a surgeon. And this one was well feared, for he was sly as a wolverine, and while a great cheat and hard to engage in a fair quarrel, yet did not fear to die and preferred great odds to single combat. And his style of fencing was peculiar, intermixed with strange side-steps and glides and always an attack wavering and elusive, and the sudden end at the upward flash of Scalpel from the very air it seemed. And many who claimed enmity to this one were found strangely strangled, as by their own hands. So the Gray Mouser

was feared and only drunken bravos dared a quarrel and they dissuaded quickly by wiser companions.

"Until one night, the market night, the huxters all acry and horns blaring wares and smoky, stinking torches flared yellow-red in the foggy air for the walled city of the Tuatha De Danaan called Lankhmar was built on the edge of the Great Salt Marsh—there strode into the group of lounging bravos a pair of monstrous men. The one who laughed thē merrier was full seven feet in height His light chestnut hair was bound in a ringlet of pure gold, engraved with runes. His eyes, wide-set, were proud and of fearless mien. His wrist between gauntlet and mail was white as milk and thick as a hero's ankle. His features were clean cut and his mouth smiled as he fingered the ponderous hilt of a huge longsword with long and nimble fingers. But ne'er the less . . .

"Anyhow, they met, and the saga of how the Gray Mouser and Fafhrd of the Blue Eyes came to the innermost vaults of the City of the Forbidden God and there met death in the moment of victory in no common fashion, was begun."

My imagination was enthralled and I responded with a fragment hinting at some further exploits of the two strange ruffians. With subsequent letters, the saga grew.

Fafhrd and the Mouser went outside Lankhmar to meet their flesh-and-blood and supernatural adversaries. They traversed the green forests of the Land of the Seven Cities. They were shipwrecked on the Bleak Shore. They shivered on the Cold Waste. They sought to cross the Sinking Land and were engulfed. They were drawn into the deadly intrigues of the subterranean kingdom of Quarmal. They became acquainted with Sheelba of the Eyeless Face.

They ventured from periods outside recorded history into the times of the first Caesars and the Macedonian Empires.

Episodes took form, such as *Conquest Among the Baldest Rats, The Seventh Eye of Ningauble, The Adventure of the Grain Ships.*

Eventually a very few of these got actually completed and found their way into print.

Two, recorded by my own hand, are included in this book.

But the saga continues and the innermost vaults of the City of the Forbidden God still seem far away.

FRITZ LEIBER, JR.

2 January 1946
Chicago, Illinois

Ancient Adventures

The Sunken Land

"I WAS BORN with luck as a twin!" roared Fafhrd the Northerner jovially, leaping up so swiftly that the cranky sloop rocked a little in spite of its outriggers. "I catch a fish in the middle of the ocean. I rip up its belly. And look, little man, what I find!"

The Gray Mouser drew back from the fish-bloodied hand thrust almost into his face, wrinkled his nose with sneering fastidiousness, raised his left eyebrow and peered. The object did not seem very small even on Fafhrd's broad palm, and although slimed-over a little, was indubitably gold. It was both a ring and a key, the key part set at a right angle, so that it would lie along the finger when worn. There were carvings of some sort. Instinctively the Gray Mouser did not like the object. It somehow focused the vague uneasiness he had felt now for several days.

To begin with, he did not like the huge, salty ocean, and only Fafhrd's bold enthusiasm and his own longing for the land of Lankhmar had impelled him to embark on this long, admittedly risky voyage across unchartered deeps. He did not like the fact

that a school of fish was making the water boil at such a great distance from any land. Even the uniformly stormless weather and favorable winds disturbed him, seeming to indicate correspondingly great misfortunes held in store, like a growing thundercloud in quiet air. Too much good luck was always dangerous. And now this ring, acquired without effort by an astonishingly lucky chance.

They peered at it more closely, Fafhrd slowly turning it round. The carving on the ring part, as far as one could make out, represented a sea monster dragging down a ship. It was highly stylized, however, and there was little detail. One might be mistaken What puzzled the Mouser most, since he had traveled to far places and knew much of the world, was that he did not recognize the style.

But in Fafhrd it roused strange memories. Recollections of certain legends told round flickering driftwood fires through the long northern nights; tales of great seafarings and distant raids made in ancient days; firelight glimpses of certain bits of loot taken by some uncountably distant ancestor and considered too traditionally significant to barter or sell or even give away; ominously vague warnings used to frighten little boys who were inclined to swim or sail too far out. For a moment his green eyes clouded and his windburned face became serious, but only for a moment.

"A pretty enough thing, you'll agree," he said, laughing. "Whose door do you think it unlocks? Some king's mistress', I'd say. It's big enough for a king's finger." He tossed it up, caught it, and wiped it on the rough cloth of his tunic.

"I wouldn't wear it," said the Mouser. "It was probably eaten from a drowned man's hand and sucked poison from the sea ooze. Throw it back."

"And fish for a bigger one?" asked Fafhrd, grinning. "No, I'm content with this." He thrust it down on the middle finger of his left hand, doubled up his fist, and surveyed it critically. "Good for bashing people with, too," he remarked.

Then, seeing a big fish flash out of the water and almost flop into the cockpit, he snatched up his bow, fitted to the string a featherless arrow whose head was barbed and heavily weighted, and stared down over the side, one foot extended along the outrigger. A light, waxed line was attached to the arrow.

The Mouser watched him, not without envy. Fafhrd, big rangy man that he was, seemed to acquire an altogether new

litheness and sureness of movement whenever they were on shipboard. He became as nimble as the Mouser was on shore. The Mouser was no landlubber and could swim as well as Fafhrd, but he always felt a trifle uneasy when there was only water in sight, day in and day out, just as Fafhrd felt uneasy in cities, though relishing taverns and street fights. On shipboard the Mouser became cautious and apprehensive; he made a point of watching for slow leaks, creeping fires, tainted food and rotten cordage. He disapproved of Fafhrd's constant trying out of new rigs and waiting until the last moment before reefing sail. It irked him a little that he couldn't quite call it foolhardy.

Fafhrd continued to scan intently the swelling, sliding waters. His long, copper-red hair was shoved back over his ears and knotted securely. He was clothed in rough, brownish tunic and trousers. Light leather slippers, easily kicked off, were on his feet Belt, longsword, and other weapons were, of course, absent, wrapped away in oiled cloth against the rust. And there were no jewels or ornaments, save for the ring.

The Mouser's gaze shifted past him to where clouds were piling up a little on the horizon off the bow to starboard. He wondered, almost with relief, whether this mightn't be the dirty weather due them. He pulled his thin gray tunic closer at his throat and shifted the tiller a little. The sun, near setting, projected his crouching shadow against the brownish sail.

Fafhrd's bow twanged and the arrow plummeted. Line hissed from the reel he held in his arrow hand. He checked it with his thumb. It slackened a trifle, then jerked off toward the stern. Fafhrd's foot slid along the outrigger until it stopped against the pontoon, a good three arm's lengths from the side. He let the other foot slide after it and lay there effortlessly braced, sea drenching his legs, playing the fish carefully, laughing and grunting satisfiedly.

"And what was your luck this time?" the Mouser asked afterward, as Fafhrd served them smoking-hot, white tender flesh broiled over the firebox in the snug cabin forward. "Did you get a bracelet and necklace to match the ring?"

Fafhrd grinned with his mouth full and did not answer, as if there were nothing in the world to do but eat. But when they stretched themselves out later in the starry, cloud-broken darkness alive with a racing wind from starboard that drove their craft along at an increasing speed, he began to talk.

"I think they called the land Simorgya. It sank under the sea

ages ago. Yet even then my people had gone raiding against it, though it was a long sail out and a weary beat homeward. My memory's uncertain. I only heard scraps of talk about it when I was a little child. But I did see a few trinkets carved somewhat like this ring; just a very few. The legends, I think, told that the men of far Simorgya were mighty magicians, claiming power over wind and wave and the creatures below. Yet the sea gulped them down for all that. Now they're there." He rotated his hand until his thumb pointed at the bottom of the boat. "My people, the legends say, went raiding against them one summer, and none of the boats returned, save one, which came back after hope had been lost, its men almost dead from thirst. They told of sailing on and on, and never reaching Simorgya, never sighting its rocky coast and squat, many-windowed towers. Only the empty sea. More raiders went out the next summer and the next, yet none ever found Simorgya."

"But in that case," questioned the Mouser sharply, "may we not even now be sailing over that sunken land? May not that very fish you caught have swum in and out the windows of those towers?"

"Who can say?" answered Fafhrd, a little dreamily. "The ocean's big. If we're where we think we are—that is, halfway home—it might be the case. Or not. I do not know if there ever really was a Simorgya. The legend-makers are great liars. In any case, that fish could hardly have been so ancient as to have eaten the flesh of a man of Simorgya."

"Nevertheless," said the Mouser in a small, flat voice, "I'd throw the ring away."

Fafhrd chuckled. His imagination was stirred, so that he saw the fabled land of Simorgya, not lightless and covered with great drifts of sea ooze, but as it once might have been, alive with ancient industry and commerce, strong with alien wizardry. Then the picture changed and he saw a long, narrow, twenty-oared galley, such as his people made, driving ahead into a stormy sea. There was the glint of gold and steel about the captain on the poop, and the muscles of the steersman cracked as he strained at the steering oar. The faces of the warrior-rowers were exultantly eager, dominated by the urge to rape the unknown. The whole ship was like a thirsty spearhead. He marveled at the vividness of the picture. Old longings vibrated faintly in his flesh. He felt the ring, ran his finger over the carving of the ship and monster, and again chuckled.

The Mouser fetched a stubby, heavy-wicked candle from the cabin and fixed it in a small horn lantern that was proof against wind. Hanging at the stern it pushed back the darkness a little, not much. Until midnight it was the Mouser's watch. After a while Fafhrd slumbered.

He awoke with the feeling that the weather had changed and quick work was wanted. The Mouser was calling him. The sloop was heeled over so that the starboard pontoon rode the crests of the waves. There was chilly spray in the wind. The lantern swung wildly. Only astern were stars visible. The Mouser brought the sloop into the wind, and Fafhrd took a triple reef in the sail, while waves hammered at the bow, an occasional light crest breaking over.

When they were on their course again, he did not immediately join the Mouser, but stood wondering, for almost the first time, how the sloop would stand heavy seas. It was not the sort of boat he would have built in his northern homeland, but it was the best that could be gotten under the circumstances. He had caulked and tarred it meticulously, replaced any wood that looked too weak, substituted a triangular sail for the square one, and increased the height of the bow a trifle. To offset a tendency to capsize, he had added outriggers a little astern of the mast, getting the strongest, truest wood for the long cross pieces, carefully steaming them into the proper shape. It was a good job, he knew, but that didn't change the fact that the boat had a clumsy skeleton and many hidden weaknesses. He sniffed the raw, salt air and peered to windward through narrowed eyes, trying to gauge the weather. The Mouser was saying something, he realized, and he turned his head to listen.

"Throw the ring away before she blows a hurricane!"

He smiled and made a wide gesture that meant "No." Then he turned back to gaze at the wild glimmering chaos of darkness and waves to windward. Thoughts of the boat and the weather dropped away, and he was content to drink in the awesome, age-old scene, swaying to keep balance, feeling each movement of the boat and at the same time sensing, almost as if it were something akin to himself, the godless force of the elements.

It was then the thing happened that took away his power to react and held him, as it were, in a spell. Out of the surging wall of darkness emerged the dragon-headed prow of a galley. He saw the black wood of the sides, the light wood of the oars, the glint of wet metal. It was so like the ship of his imaginings that he

was struck dumb with wonder as to whether it was only another vision, or whether he had had a foreglimpse of it by second sight, or whether he had actually summoned it across the deeps by his thoughts. It loomed higher, higher, higher.

The Mouser cried out and pushed over the tiller, his body arched with the mighty effort. Almost too late the sloop came out of the path of the dragon-headed prow. And still Fafhrd stared as at an apparition. He did not hear the Mouser's warning shout as the sloop's sail filled from the other side and slammed across with a rush. The boom caught him in the back of the knees and hurled him outward, but not into the sea, for his feet found the narrow pontoon and he balanced there precariously. In that instant an oar of the galley swung down at him and he toppled sideways, instinctively grasping the blade as he fell. The sea drenched him and wrenched at him, but he clung tightly and began to pull himself up the oar, hand over hand.

His legs were numb; he feared he would be unable to swim. And he was still bewitched by what he saw. For the moment he forgot the Mouser and the sloop entirely. He shook off the greedy waves, reached the side of the galley, caught hold of the oarhole. Then he looked back and saw, in a kind of stupid surprise, the disappearing stern of the sloop and the Mouser's gray-capped face, revealed by a close swing of the lantern staring at him in blank helplessness.

What happened next ended whatever spell had held him. A hand that carried steel struck. He twisted to one side and caught the wrist, then grasped the side of the galley, got his foot in the oarhole, on top of the oar, and heaved. The man dropped the knife too late, clawed at the side, failed to get a secure hold, and was dragged overboard, spitting, and snapping his jaws in futile panic. Fafhrd, instinctively taking the offensive, sprang down onto the oarbench, which was the last of ten and half under the poop deck. His questioning eyes spied a rack of swords and he whirled one out, menacing the two shadowy figures hastening toward him, one from the forward oarbenches, one from the poop. They attacked with a rush, but silently, which was strange. The spray-wet weapons sparkled as they clashed.

Fafhrd fought warily, on guard for a blow from above, timing his lunges to the roll of the galley. He dodged a swashing blow and parried an unexpected backhanded slash from the same weapon. Stale, sour wine fumes puffed into his face. Someone dragged out an oar and thrust it like a huge lance; it

came between Fafhrd and the two swordsmen, crashing heavily into the sword rack. Fafhrd glimpsed a ratlike, beady-eyed, toothy face peering up at him from the deeper darkness under the poop. One of the swordsmen lunged wildly, slipped and fell. The other gave ground, then gathered himself for a rush. But he paused with his sword in midair, looking over Fafhrd's head as if at a new adversary. The crest of a great wave struck him in the chest, obscuring him.

Fafhrd felt the weight of the water on his shoulders and clutched at the poop for support. The deck was at a perilous tilt. Water gushed up through the opposite oarholes. In the confusion, he realized, the galley had gotten into the troughs and was beginning to take the seas broadside. She wasn't built to stand that. He vaulted up out of another breaking wave onto the poop and added his strength to that of the lone struggling steersman. Together they strained at the great oar, which seemed to be set in stone instead of water. Inch by inch they fought their way across the narrow deck. None the less, the galley seemed doomed.

Then something — a momentary lessening of the wind and waves or perhaps a lucky pull by a forward oarsman—decided the issue. As slowly and laboriously as a waterlogged hulk the galley lifted and began to edge back into the proper course. Fafhrd and steersman strained prodigiously to hold each foot gained. Only when the galley was riding safe before the wind did they look up. Fafhrd saw two swords leveled steadily at his chest. He calculated his chances and did not move.

It was not easy to believe that fire had been preserved through that tremendous wetting, but one of them nevertheless carried a sputtering tarry torch. By its light Fafhrd saw that they were Northerners akin to himself. Big rawboned fellows, so blond they seemed almost to lack eyebrows. They wore metal-studded war gear and close-fitting bronze helmets. Their expressions were frozen halfway between a glare and a grin. Again he smelled stale wine. His glance strayed forward. Three oarsmen were bailing with bucket and hand crane.

Somebody was striding toward the poop—the leader, if one could guess from gold and jewels and an air of assurance. He sprang up the short ladder, his limbs supple as a cat's. He seemed younger than the rest and his features were almost delicate. Fine, silky blond hair was plastered wetly against his cheeks. But there was feline rapacity in his tight, smiling lips, and there was

craziness in his jewel-blue eyes. Fafhrd hardened his own face against their inspection. One question kept nagging him. Why, even at the height of the confusion, had there been no cries, no shouts, no bellowed orders? Since he had come aboard, there had not been a word uttered.

The young leader seemed to come to a conclusion about Fafhrd, for his thin smile widened a trifle and he motioned toward the oar deck. Then Fafhrd broke silence and said in a voice that sounded unnatural and hoarse. "What do you intend? Weigh well the fact that I saved your ship."

He tensed himself, noting with some satisfaction that the steersman stayed close beside him, as if their shared task had forged a bond between them. The smile left the leader's face. He laid his finger to his lips and then impatiently repeated his first gesture. This time Fafhrd understood. He was to replace the oarsman he had pulled overboard. He could not but admit there was a certain ironic justice to the idea. It was borne in on him that swift death would be his lot if he renewed the fight at such a disadvantage; slow death, if he leaped overboard in the mad hope of finding the sloop in the howling, heaving darkness. The arms holding the swords became taut. He curtly nodded his head in submission. At least they were his own people.

With the first feel of the heavy, rebellious water against the blade of his oar, a new feeling took hold of Fafhrd—a feeling with which he was not unfamiliar. He seemed to become part of the ship, to share its purposes, whatever they might be. It was the age-old spirit of the oar-bench. When his muscles had warmed to the task and his nerves became accustomed to the rhythm, he found himself stealing glances at the men around him, as if he had known them before; trying to penetrate and share the eager, set look on their faces.

Something huddled in many folds of ragged cloth shuffled out from the little cabin far back under the poop and held a leather flask to the lips of the opposite oarsman. The creature looked absurdly squat among such tall men. When it turned, Fafhrd recognized the beady eyes he had glimpsed before, and as it came nearer, distinguished under the heavy cowl the wrinkled, subtle, ochre face of an aged Mingol.

"So you're the new one," the Mingol croaked jeeringly. "I liked your swordplay. Drink deep now, for Lavas Laerk may decide to sacrifice you to the sea gods before morning. But, mind you, don't dribble any."

Fafhrd sucked greedily, then almost coughed and spat when a rush of strong wine seared his throat. After a while the Mingol jerked the flask away.

"Now you know what Lavas Laerk feeds his oarsmen. There are few crews in this world or the next that row on wine." He chuckled humorously, but with a certain glee, then said, "But you're wondering why I talk aloud. Well, young Lavas Laerk may put a vow of silence on all his men, but he may not do the same to me, who am only a slave. For I tend the fire—how carefully you know—and serve out the wine and cook the meat, and recite incantations for the good of the ship. There are certain things that neither Lavas Laerk nor any other man, nor any other demon, may demand of me."

"But what does Lavas Laerk—"

The Mingol's leathery palm clapped over Fafhrd's mouth and shut off the whispered question.

"Sh! Do you care so little for life? Remember, you are Lavas Laerk's henchman. But I will tell you what you would know." He sat down on the wet bench beside Fafhrd, looking like a bundle of black rags someone had dropped there. "Lavas Laerk has sworn to raid far Simorgya, and he has put a vow of silence upon himself and his men until they sight the coast. Sh! Sh! I know they say Simorgya is under the waves, or that there never was such a place. But Lavas Laerk swore a great oath before his mother, whom he hates worse than he hates his friends, and he killed a man who thought to question his decision. So it's Simorgya we seek, if only to steal pearls from the oysters and ravish the fishes. Lean down and row more easily for a space, and I will tell you a secret that's no secret and make a prophecy that's no prophecy." He crowded closer. "Lavas Laerk hates all men who are sober, for he believes and rightly—that only drunken men are even a little like himself. Tonight the crew will row well, though it's a day since they've had meat. Tonight the wine will make them see at least the glow of the visions that Lavas Laerk sees. But next morning there will be aching backs and sick guts and pain-hammered skulls. And then there will be mutiny and not even Lavas Laerk's madness will save him."

Fafhrd wondered why the Mingol shuddered, coughed weakly and made a gargling sound. He reached over and a warm fluid drenched his naked hand. Then Lavas Laerk pulled his dirk from the Mingol's neck and the Mingol rolled forward off the bench.

No word was spoken, but knowledge that some abominable deed had been committed passed from oarsman to oarsman through the stormy darkness until it reached the bench in the bow. Then gradually there began a kind of pent-up commotion, which increased markedly as there slowly percolated forward an awareness of the specially heinous nature of the deed—the murder of the slave who tended the fire and whose magical powers, though often scoffed at, were entwined with the destiny of the ship itself. Still no completely intelligible words, but low grunts and snarls and mutterings, the scrape of oars being drawn in and rested, a growing murmur in which consternation and fear and anger were mixed, and which washed back and forth between bow and poop like a wave in a tub. Half caught up by it, Fafhrd readied himself for a spring, though whether at the apprehensively motionless figure of Lavas Laerk or back toward the comparative safety of the poop cabin, he could not say. Certainly Lavas Laerk was doomed; or rather he would have been doomed, had not the steersman screamed from the poop in a great shaky voice, "Land ho! Simorgya! Simorgya!"

That wild cry, like a clawed skeletal hand, seized upon the agitation of the crew and wrenched it to an almost unbearable climax. A shuddering inhalation of breath swept the ship. Then came shouts of wonder, cries of fear, curses that were half prayers. Two oarsmen started to fight together for no other reason than that the sudden, painful upgush of feeling demanded action of some sort, any sort. Another pushed wildly at his oar, screeching at the rest to follow his example and reverse the galley's course and so escape. Fafhrd vaulted upon his bench and stared ahead.

It loomed up vast as a mountain and perilously close. A great black blot vaguely outlined by the lesser darkness of the night, partly obscured by trailings of mist and scud, yet showing in various places and at varying distances squares of dim light which by their regular arrangement could be nothing but windows. And with each pounding heartbeat the roar of surf and the thunder of breaking waves grew louder.

All at once it was upon them. Fafhrd saw a great overhanging crag slide by, so close it snapped the last oar on the opposite side. As the galley lifted on a wave he looked awestruck into three windows in the crag—if it was a crag and not a half submerged tower—but saw nothing save a ghostly yellow luminescence. Then he heard Lavas Laerk bellowing commands in a harsh,

high-pitched voice. A few of the men worked frantically at the oars, but it was too late for that, although the galley seemed to have gotten behind some protecting wall of rock into slightly calmer waters. A terrible rasping noise went the length of the keel. Timbers groaned and cracked. A last wave lifted them and a great grinding crash sent men reeling and tumbling. Then the galley stopped moving altogether and the only sound was the roar of the surf, until Lavas Laerk cried exultantly, "Serve out weapons and wine! Make ready for a raid!"

The words seemed incredible in this more than dangerous situation, with the galley broken beyond repair, gutted by the rocks. Yet the men rallied and seemed even to catch something of the wild eagerness of their master, who had proven to them that the world was no more sane than he.

Fafhrd watched them fetch torch after torch from the poop cabin, until the whole stern of the wreck smoked and flared. He watched them snatch and suck at the wineskins and heft the swords and dirks given out, comparing them and cleaving at the air to get the feel. Then some of them grabbed hold of him and hustled him to the sword rack, saying, "Here, Red Hair, you must have a weapon, too." Fafhrd went along unresisting, yet he felt that something would prevent them from arming one who so late had been their enemy. And he was right in this, for Lavas Laerk stopped the lieutenant who was about to hand Fafhrd a sword, and stared with growing intentness at Fafhrd's left hand.

Puzzled, Fafhrd raised it, and Lavas Laerk cried, "Seize him!" and at the same instant jerked something from Fafhrd's middle finger. Then Fafhrd remembered. It was the ring.

"There can be no doubt about the workmanship," said Lavas Laerk, peering cunningly at Fafhrd, his bright blue eyes giving the impression of being out of focus or slightly crossed. "This man is a Simorgyan spy, or perhaps a Simorgyan demon who has taken the form of a Northerner to allay our suspicions. He climbed out of the sea in the teeth of a roaring storm, did he not? What man among you saw any boat?"

"I saw a boat," ventured the steersman hurriedly. "A queer sloop with triangular sail—" But Lavas Laerk shut him up with a sidewise glance.

Fafhrd felt the point of a dirk at his back and checked his tightening muscles.

"Shall we kill him?" The question came from close behind Fafhrd's ear.

Lavas Laerk smiled crookedly up at the darkness and paused, as if listening to the advice of some invisible storm wraith. Then he shook his head. "Let him live for the present. He can show us where loot is hid. Guard him with naked swords."

Whereupon they all left the galley, clambering down ropes hung from the prow onto rocks which the surf alternately covered and uncovered. One or two laughed and jumped. A dropped torch hissed out in the brine. There was much shouting. Someone began to sing in a drunken voice that had an edge like a rusty knife. Then Lavas Laerk got them into a sort of order and they marched away, half of them carrying torches, a few still hugging wineskins, sliding and slipping, cursing the sharp rocks and barnacles which cut them when they fell, hurling exaggerated threats at the darkness ahead, where strange windows glowed. Behind them the long galley lay like a dead beetle, the oars sprawled out from the ports all askew.

They had marched for some little distance, and the sound of the breakers was less thunderous, when their torchlight helped reveal a portal in a great wall of black rock that might or might not have been a castle rather than a caverned cliff. The portal was square and high as an oar. Three worn stone steps drifted with wet sand led up to it. Dimly they could discern on the pillars, and on the heavy lintel overhead, carvings partly obliterated by slime and incrustations of some sort, but unmistakably Simorgyan in their obscure symbolism.

The crew, staring silently now, drew closer together. The ragged procession became a tight knot. Then Lavas Laerk called mockingly, "Where are your guards, Simorgya? Where are your fighting men?" and walked straight up the stone steps. After a moment of uncertainty, the knot broke and the men followed him.

On the massive threshold Fafhrd involuntarily halted, dumbstruck by realization of the source of the faint yellow light he had earlier noticed in the high windows. For the source was everywhere: ceiling, walls, and slimy floor all glowed with a wavering phosphorescence. Even the carvings glimmered. Mixed awe and repugnance gripped him. But the men pressed around and against him, and carried him forward. Wine and leadership had dulled their sensibilities and as they strode down the long corridor they seemed little aware of the abysmal scene.

At first some held their weapons ready to meet a possible foray or ambush, but soon they lowered them negligently, and

even sucked at the wineskins and jested. A hulking oarsman, whose blond beard was patched with yellow scud from the surf, struck up a chanty and others joined in, until the dank walls roared. Deeper and deeper they penetrated into the cave or castle, along the wide, winding, ooze-carpeted corridor.

Fafhrd was carried along as by a current. When he moved too slowly, the others jostled him and he quickened his pace, but it was all involuntary. Only his eyes responded to his will, turning from side to side, drinking in details with fearful curiosity. The endless series of vague carvings, wherein sea monsters and unwholesome manlike figures and vaguely anthropomorphic giant skates or rays seemed to come alive and stir as the phosphorescence fluctuated. A group of highest windows or openings of some sort, from which dark slippery weeds trailed down. The pools of water here and there. The still-alive, gasping fish which the others trod or kicked aside. The clumps of bearded shells clinging to the corners. The impression of things scuttling out of the way ahead. Louder and louder the thought drummed in his skull: Surely the others must realize where they were. Surely they must know the phosphorescence was that of the sea. Surely they must know that this was the retreat of the more secret creatures of the deep. Surely, surely they must know that Simorgya had indeed sunk under the sea and only risen up yesterday—or yester-hour.

But on they marched after Lavas Laerk, and still sang and shouted and swilled wine in quick gulps, throwing back their heads and lifting up the sacks as they strode. And Fafhrd could not speak. His shoulder muscles were contracted as if the weight of the sea were already pressing them down. His mind was engulfed and oppressed by the ominous presence of sunken Simorgya. Memories of the legends. Thoughts of the black centuries during which sea life had slowly crept and wriggled and swum through the mazes of rooms and corridors until it had a lair in every crack and cranny and Simorgya was one with the mysteries of the ocean. In a deep grotto that opened on the corridor he made out a thick table of stone, with a great stone chair behind it; and though he could not be sure, he thought he distinguished an octopus shape slouched there in a travesty of a human occupant, tentacles coiling the chair, unblinking eyes staring glisteningly.

Gradually the flare of the smokey torches paled, as the phosphorescence grew stronger. And when the men broke off

singing, the sound of the surf was no longer audible.

Then Lavas Laerk, from around a sharp turn in the corridor, uttered a triumphant cry. The others hastened after, stumbling, lurching, calling out eagerly.

"Oh, Simorgya!" crew Lavas Laerk, "we have found your treasure house!"

The room in which the corridor ended was square and considerably lower-ceilinged than the corridor. Standing here and there were a number of black, soggy-looking, heavily bound chests. The stuff underfoot was muckier. There were more pools of water. The phosphorescence was stronger.

The blond-bearded oarsman leaped ahead as the others hesitated, and wrenched at the cover of the nearest chest. A corner came away in his hands, the wood soft as cheese, the seeming metal a black, smeary ooze. He grasped at it again and pulled off most of the top, revealing a layer of dully-gleaming gold and slime-misted gems. Over that jeweled surface a crablike creature scuttled, escaping through a hole in the back.

With a great, greedy shout, the others rushed at the chests, jerking, gouging, even smiting with their swords at the spongy wood. Two, fighting as to which should break open a chest, fell against it and it went to pieces under them, leaving them struggling in jewels and muck.

All this while Lavas Laerk stood on the same spot from which he had uttered his first taunting cry. To Fafhrd, who stood forgotten beside him, it seemed that Lavas Laerk was distraught that his quest should come to any end, that Lavas Laerk was desperately searching for something further, something more than jewels and gold to sate his mad willfulness. Then he noted that Lavas Laerk was looking at something intently—a square, slime-filmed, but apparently golden door across the room from the mouth of the corridor; upon it was the carving of some strange, undulant blanketlike sea monster. He heard Lavas Laerk laugh throatily and watched him stride unswervingly toward the door. He saw that Lavas Laerk had something in his hand. With a shock of surprise he recognized it as the ring Lavas Laerk had taken from him. He saw Lavas Laerk shove at the door without budging it. He saw Lavas Laerk fumble with the ring and fit the key part into the golden door and turn it. He saw the door give a little to Lavas Laerk's next push.

Then he realized—and the realization came with an impact like a rushing wall of water—that nothing had happened

accidentally, that everything from the moment his arrow struck the fish, had been intended by someone or something—something that wanted a door unlocked—and he turned and fled down the corridor as if a tidal wave were sucking at his heels.

The corridor, without torchlight, was pale and shifty as a nightmare. The phosphorescence seemed to crawl as if alive, revealing previously unspied creatures in every niche. Fafhrd stumbled, sprawled at full length, raced on. His fastest bursts of speed seemed slow as in a bad dream. He tried to look only ahead, but still glimpsed from the corners of his eyes every detail he had seen before: the trailing weeds, the monstrous carvings, the bearded shells, the sombrely staring octopus eyes. He noted without surprise that his feet and body glowed wherever the slime had splashed or smeared. He saw a small square of darkness in the omnipresent phosphorescence and sprinted toward it. It grew in size. It was the cavern's portal. He plunged across the threshold into the night. He heard a voice calling his name.

It was the Gray Mouser's voice. It came from the opposite direction to the wrecked galley. He ran towards it across treacherous ledges. Starlight, now come back, showed a black gulf before his feet. He leaped, landed with a shaking impact on another rock surface, dashed forward without falling. He saw the top of a mast above an edge of darkness and almost bowled over the small figure that was staring raptly in the direction from which he had just fled. The Mouser seized him by the shoulder, dragged him to the edge, pulled him over. They clove the water together and swam out to the sloop anchored in the rock-sheltered lee. The Mouser started to heave at the anchor but Fafhrd slashed the line with a knife snatched from the Mouser's belt and jerked up the sail in swift, swishing rushes.

Slowly the sloop began to move. Gradually the ripples became wavelets, the wavelets became smacking waves. Then they slipped past a black, foam-edged sword of rock and were in the open sea. Still Fafhrd did not speak, but crowded on all canvas and did all else possible to coax speed from the storm-battered sloop. Resigned to mystification, the Mouser helped him.

They had not been long underway when the blow fell. The Mouser, looking sternward, gave a hoarse incredulous cry. The wave swiftly overtaking them was higher than the mast. And something was sucking the sloop back. The Mouser raised his

arms shieldingly. Then the sloop began to climb; up, up, up until it reached the top, overbalanced, and plummeted down on the opposite side. The first wave was followed by a second and a third, and a fourth, each almost as high. A larger boat would surely have been swamped. Finally the waves gave way to a choppy, foaming, unpredictable chaos, in which every ounce of effort and a thousand quick decisions were needed to keep the sloop afloat.

When the pale foredawn came, they were back on the homeward course again, a small improvised sail taking the place of the one ripped in the aftermath of the storm, enough water bailed from the hold to make the sloop seaworthy. Fafhrd, dazedly watching for the sunrise, felt weak as a woman. He only half heard the Mouser tell, in snatches, of how he had lost the galley in the storm, but followed what he guessed to be its general course until the storm cleared, and had sighted the strange island and landed there, mistakenly believing it be the galley's home port.

The Mouser then brought thin, bitter wine and salt fish, but Fafhrd pushed them away and said, "One thing I must know. I never looked back. You were staring earnestly at something behind me. What was it?"

The Mouser shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. The distance was too great and the light was queer. What I thought I saw was rather foolish. I'd have given a good deal to have been closer." He frowned, shrugged his shoulders again. "Well, what I thought I saw was this. A crowd of men wearing big black cloaks—they looked like Northerners -came rushing out of an opening of some sort. There was something odd about them: the light by which I saw them didn't seem to have any source. Then they waved the big black cloaks around as if they were fighting with them or doing some sort of dance. . . . I told you it was very foolish . . . and then they got down on their hands and knees and covered themselves up with the cloaks and crawled back into the place from which they had come. Now tell me I'm a liar."

Fafhrd shook his head. "Only those weren't cloaks," he said.

The Mouser began to sense that there was much more to it than he had even guessed. "What were they then?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Fafhrd.

"But then what was the place, I mean the island that almost sucked us down when it sank?"

"Simorgya," said Fafhrd and lifted his head and began to

grin in a cruel, chilly, wild-eyed way that took the Mouser aback. "Simorgya," repeated Fafhrd, and pulled himself to the side of the boat and glared down at the rushing water. "Simorgya. And now it's sunk again, And may it soak there forever and rot in its own corruption, till all's muck!" He trembled spasmodically with the passion of his curse, then sank back. Along the rim of the east a ruddy smudge began to show.

Adept's Gambit

I

Tyre

IT HAPPENED THAT while Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser were dallying in a wine shop near the Sidonian Harbor of Tyre, where all wine shops are of doubtful repute, a long-limbed yellow-haired Galatian girl lolling in Fafhrd's lap turned suddenly into a wallopingly large sow. It was a singular occurrence, even in Tyre The Mouser's eyebrows arched as the Galatian's breasts, exposed by the Cretan dress that was the style revival of the hour, became the uppermost pair of slack white dugs, and he watched the whole proceeding with unfeigned interest.

The next day four camel traders, who drank only water disinfected with sour wine, and two purple-armed dyers, who were cousins of the host, swore that no transformation took place and that they saw nothing, or very little out of the ordinary. But three drunken soldiers of King Antiochus and the four women with them, as well as a completely sober Armenian juggler, attested the event in all its details. An Egyptian mummy-smuggler won brief attention with the claim that the oddly garbed sow was only a semblance, or phantom, and made dark

references to visions vouchsafed men by the animal gods of his native land, but since it was hardly a year since the Seluicids had beaten the Ptolomies out of Tyre, he was quickly shouted down. An impecunious travelling lecturer from Jerusalem took up an even more attenuated position, the semblance of a semblance of a sow.

Fafhrd, however, had no time for such metaphysical niceties. When, maintaining that the sow was not a sow, or even a semblance, but only with a roar of disgust not unmingled with terror, he had shoved the squealing monstrosity halfway across the room so that it fell with a great splash into the water tank, it turned back again into a long-limbed Galatian girl and a very angry one, for the stale water in which the sow had floundered drenched her garments and plastered down her yellow hair (the Mouser murmured, "Aphrodite!") and the sow's uncorsettable bulk had split the tight Cretan waist. The stars of midnight were peeping through the skylight above the tank, and the wine cups had been many times refilled, before her anger was dissipated. Then, just as Fafhrd was impressing a re-introductory kiss upon her melting lips, he felt them once again become slobbering and tusky. This time she picked herself up from between two wine casks and, ignoring the shrieks, excited comments, and befuddled stares as merely part of a rude mystification that had been carried much too far, she walked with Amazonian dignity from the room. She paused only once, on the dark and deep-worn threshold, and then but to hurl at Fafhrd a small dagger, which he absentmindedly deflected upward with his copper goblet, so that it struck full in the mouth a wooden satyr on the wall, giving that deity the appearance of introspectively picking his teeth.

Fafhrd's sea-green eyes became likewise thoughtful. He slowly scanned the wine-shop patrons, face by sly-eyed face, pausing doubtfully when he came to a tall, dark-haired girl beyond the water tank, finally returning to the Mouser. There he stopped, and a certain suspiciousness became apparent in his gaze.

The Mouser folded his arms, flared his snub nose, and returned the stare with all the sneering suavity of a Parthian ambassador. Abruptly he turned, embraced and kissed the cross-eyed Greek girl sitting beside him, grinned wordlessly at Fafhrd, dusted from his coarse-woven gray silk robe the antimony that had fallen from her eyelids, and folded his arms again.

Fafhrd began softly to beat the base of his goblet against the butt of his palm. His wide, tight-laced leather belt, wet with the sweat that stained his white linen tunic, creaked faintly.

Meanwhile murmured speculation as to the person responsible for casting a spell on Fafhrd's Galatian eddied around the tables and settled uncertainly on the tall, dark-haired girl, probably because she was sitting alone and therefore could not join in the suspicious whispering.

"She's an odd one," Chloe, the cross-eyed Greek, confided to the Mouser. "Silent Salmacis they call her, but I happen to know that her real name is Ahura."

"A Persian?" asked the Mouser.

Chloe shrugged. "She's been around for years, though no one knows exactly where she lives or what she does. She used to be a gay, gossipy little thing, though she never would go with men. Once she gave me an amulet, to protect me from someone, she said—I still wear it. But then she was away for a while," Chloe continued garrulously, "and when she came back she was just like you see her now -shy, and tight-mouthed as a clam, with a look in her eyes of someone peering through a crack in a brothel wall."

"Ah," said the Mouser. He looked at the dark-haired girl, and continued to look, appreciatively, even when Chloe tugged at his sleeve. Chloe gave herself a mental bastinado for having been so foolish as to call a man's attention to another girl.

Fafhrd was not distracted by this byplay. He continued to stare at the Mouser with the stony intentness of a whole avenue of Egyptian colossi. The cauldron of his anger came to a boil.

"Scum of wit-weighted culture," he said, "I consider it the nadir of base perfidy that you should try out on me your puking sorcery."

"Softly, man of strange loves," purred the Mouser. "This unfortunate mishap has befallen several others besides yourself, among them an ardent Assyrian warlord whose paramour was changed into a spider between the sheets, and an impetuous Ethiop who found himself hoisted several yards into the air and kissing a giraffe. Truly, to one who knows the literature, there is nothing new in the annals of magic and thaumaturgy."

"Moreover," continued Fafhrd, his low-pitched voice loud in the silence, "I regard it an additional treachery that you should practice your pig-trickery on me in an unsuspecting moment of pleasure."

"And even if I should chose sorcerously to discommode your

lechery," hypothesized the Mouser, "I do not think it would be the woman that I would metamorphose."

"Furthermore," pursued Fafhrd, leaning forward and laying his hand on the large sheathed dirk beside him on the bench, "I judge it an intolerable and direct affront to myself that you should pick a Galatian girl, member of a race that is cousin to my own."

"It would not be the first time," observed the Mouser portentously, slipping his fingers inside his robe, "that I have had to fight you over a woman."

"But it would be the first time," asserted Fafhrd, with an even greater portentousness, "that you had to fight me over a pig!"

For a moment he maintained his belligerent posture, head lowered, jaw outthrust, eyes slitted. Then he began to laugh.

It was something. Fafhrd's laughter It began with windy snickers through the nostrils, next spewed out between clenched teeth, then became a series of jolting chortles, swiftly grew into a roar against which the barbarian had to brace himself, legs spread wide, head thrown back, as if against a gale. It was a laughter of the storm-lashed forest or the sea, a laughter that conjured up wide visions, that seemed to blow from a more primeval, heartier, lusher time. It was the laughter of the Elder Gods observing their creature man and noting their omissions, miscalculations and mistakes.

The Mouser's lips began to twitch. He grimaced wryly, seeking to avoid the infection. Then he joined in.

Fafhrd paused, panted, snatched up the wine pitcher, drained it.

"Pig-trickery!" he bellowed, and began to laugh all over again.

The Tyrian riff-raff gawked at them in wonder—astounded, awestruck, their imaginations cloudily stirred.

Among them, however, was one whose response was noteworthy. The dark-haired girl was staring at Fafhrd avidly, drinking in the sound, the oddest sort of hunger and baffled curiosity and calculation in her eyes.

The Mouser noticed her and stopped his laughter to watch. Mentally Chloe gave herself an especially heavy swipe on the soles of her bound, naked feet.

Fafhrd's laughter trailed off. He blew out the last of it soundlessly, sucked in a normal breath, hooked his thumbs in his belt.

"The dawn stars are peeping," he commented to the Mouser, ducking his head for a look through the skylight, "It's time we were about the business."

And without more ado he and the Mouser left the shop, pushing out of their way a newly arrived and very drunken merchant of Pergamum, who looked after them bewilderedly, as if he were trying to decide whether they were a tall god and his dwarfish servitor, or a small sorceror and the great-thewed automaton who did his bidding.

Had it ended there, two weeks would have seen Fafhrd claiming that the incident of the wine shop was merely a drunken dream that had been dreamed by more than one –a kind of coincidence with which he was by no means unfamiliar. But it did not. After "the business" (which turned out to be much more complicated than had been anticipated, evolving from a fairly simple affair of Sidonian smugglers into a glittering intrigue studded with Cilician pirates, a kidnapped Cappadocian princess, a forged letter of credit on a Syracusian financier, a bargain with a female Cyprian slave-dealer, a rendezvous that turned into an ambush, some priceless tomb-filched Egyptian jewels that no one ever saw, and a band of Idumean brigands who came galloping out of the desert to upset everyone's calculations) and after Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser had returned to the soft embraces and sweet polyglot of the seaport ladies, pig-trickery befell Fafhrd once more, this time ending in a dagger brawl with some men who thought they were rescuing a pretty Bithynian girl from death by salty and odorous drowning at the hands of a murderous red-haired giant Fafhrd had insisted on dipping the girl, while still metamorphosed, into a hogshead of brine remaining from pickled pork. This incident suggested to the Mouser a scheme he never told Fafhrd: namely, to engage an amiable girl, have Fafhrd turn her into a pig, immediately sell her to a butcher, next sell her to an amorous merchant when she had escaped the bewildered butcher as a furious girl, have Fafhrd sneak after the merchant and turn her back into a pig (by this time he ought to be able to do it merely by making eyes at her), then sell her to another butcher and begin all over again. Low prices, quick profits.

For a while Fafhrd stubbornly continued to suspect the Mouser, who was forever dabbling in black magic and carried a gray leather case of bizarre instruments picked from the pockets of wizards and recondite books looted from Chaldean

libraries — even though long experience had taught Fafhrd that the Mouser seldom read systematically beyond the prefaces in the majority of his books (though he often unrolled the later portions to the accompaniment of penetrating glances and trenchant criticisms) and that he was never able to evoke the same results two times running with his enchantments. That he could manage to transform two of Fafhrd's lights of love was barely possible; that he should get a sow each time was unthinkable. Besides the thing happened more than twice; in fact, there never was a time when it did not happen. Moreover, Fafhrd did not really believe in magic, least of all the Mouser's. And if there was any doubt left in his mind, it was dispelled when a dark and satiny-skinned Egyptian beauty in the Mouser's close embrace was transformed into a giant snail. The Gray One's disgust at the slimy tracks on his silken garments was not to be mistaken, and was not lessened when two witnesses, traveling horse doctors, claimed that they had seen no snail, giant or ordinary, and agreed that the Mouser was suffering from an obscure kind of wet rot that induced hallucinations of animals in its victim, and for which they were prepared to offer a rare Median remedy at the bargain price of nineteen drachmas a jar.

Fafhrd's glee at his friend's discomfiture was short-lived, for after a night of desperate and far-flung experimentation, which, some said, blazed from the Sidonian harbor to the Temple of Melkarth a trail of snail tracks that next morning baffled all the madams and half the husbands in Tyre, the Mouser discovered something he had suspected all the time, but had hoped was not the whole truth: namely, that Chloe alone was immune to the strange plague his kisses carried.

Needless to say, this pleased Chloe immensely. An arrogant self-esteem gleamed like two clashing swords from her crossed eyes and she applied nothing but costly scented oil to her poor, mentally bruised feet — and not only mental oil, for she quickly made capital of her position by extorting enough gold from the Mouser to buy a slave whose duty it was to do very little else. She no longer sought to avoid calling the Mouser's attention to other women, in fact she rather enjoyed doing so, and the next time they encountered the dark-haired girl variously called Ahura and Silent Salmacis, as they were entering a tavern known as the Murex Shell, she volunteered more information.

"Ahura's not so innocent, you know, in spite of the way she sticks to herself. Once she went off with some old man—that was before she gave me the charm—and once I heard a primped-up

Persian lady scream at her, 'What have you done with your brother?' Ahura didn't answer, just looked at the woman coldly as a snake, and after a while the woman ran out. Brr! You should have seen her eyes!"

But the Mouser pretended not to be interested.

Fafhrd could undoubtedly have had Chloe for the polite asking, and Chloe was more than eager to extend and cement in this fashion her control over the twain. But Fafhrd's pride would not allow him to accept such a favor from his friend, and he had frequently in past days, moreover, railed against Chloe as a decadent and unappetizing contemplater of her own nose.

So he perforce led a monastic life and endured contemptuous feminine glares across the drinking table and fended off painted boys who misinterpreted his misogyny and was much irritated by a growing rumor to the effect that he had become a secret eunuch priest of Cybele. Gossip and speculation had already fantastically distorted the truer accounts of what had happened, and it did not help when the girls who had been transformed denied it for fear of hurting their business. Some people got the idea that Fafhrd had committed the nasty sin of bestiality and they urged his prosecution in the public courts. Others accounted him a fortunate man who had been visited by an amorous goddess in the guise of a swine, and who thereafter scorned all earthly girls. While still others whispered that he was a brother of Circe and that he customarily dwelt on a floating island in the Tyrrhenian Sea, where he kept cruelly transformed into pigs a whole herd of beautiful shipwrecked maidens. His laughter was heard no more and dark circles appeared in the white skin around his eyes and he began to make guarded inquiries among magicians in hopes of finding some remedial charm.

"I think I've hit on a cure for your embarrassing ailment," said the Mouser carelessly one night, laying aside a raggedy brown papyrus. "Came across it in this obscure treatise, 'The Demonology of Isaiah ben Elshaz.' It seems that whatever change takes place in the form of the woman you love, you should continue to make love to her, trusting to the power of your passion to transform her back to her original shape."

Fafhrd left off honing his great sword and asked, "Then why don't you try kissing snails?"

"It would be disagreeable and, for one free of barbarian prejudices, there is always Chloe."

"Pah! You're just going with her to keep your self-respect. I

know you. For seven days now you'd had thoughts for no one but that Ahura wench."

"A pretty chit, but not to my liking," said the Mouser icily. "It must be your eye she's the apple of. However, you really should try my remedy; I'm sure you'd prove so good at it that the shes of all the swine in the world would come squealing after you."

Whereupon Fafhrd smote at the Mouser and a scuffle ensued which did not end until the Gray One was half strangled and one of Fafhrd's arms dislocated by a method generally known only to men from beyond the Indus.

However, Fafhrd did go so far as to hold firmly at arm's length the next sow his pent passion created, and feed it slops in the hope of accomplishing something by kindness. But in the end he had once again to admit defeat and assuage with owl-stamped Athenian silver didrachmas an hysterically angry Scythian girl who was sick at the stomach. It was then that an ill-advised curious young Greek philosopher suggested to the Northman that the soul or inward form of the thing loved is alone of importance, the outward form having no ultimate significance.

"You belong to the Socratic school?" Fafhrd questioned gently.

The Greek nodded.

"Socrates was the philosopher who was able to drink unlimited quantities of wine without blinking?"

Again the quick nod.

"That was because his rational soul dominated his animal soul?"

"You are learned," replied the Greek, with a more respectful but equally quick nod.

"I am not through. Do you consider yourself in all ways a true follower of your master?"

This time the Greek's quickness undid him. He nodded, and two days later he was carried out of the wine shop by friends, who found him cradled in a broken wine barrel, as if new born in no common manner. For days he remained drunk, time enough for a small sect to spring up who believed him a reincarnation of Dionysos and as such worshipped him. The sect was dissolved when he became half sober and delivered his first oracular address, which had as its subject the evils of drunkenness.

The morning after the deification of the rash philosopher, Fafhrd awoke when the first hot sunbeams struck the flat roof

on which he and the Mouser had chosen to pass the night. Without sound or movement, suppressing the urge to groan out for someone to buy him a bag of snow from the white-capped Lebanons (over which the sun was even now peeping) to cool his aching head, he opened an eye on the sight that he in his wisdom had expected: the Mouser sitting on his heels and looking at the sea.

"Son of a wizard and a witch," he said, "it seems that once again we must fall back upon our last resource."

The Mouser did not turn his head, but he nodded it once, deliberately.

"The first time we did not come away with our lives," Fafhrd went on.

"The second time we lost our souls to the Other Creatures," the Mouser chimed in, as if they were singing a dawn chant to Isis.

"And the last time we fell through the Hole in the World."

"He may trick us into drinking the drink, and we not awake for another five hundred years."

"He may send us to our deaths and we not to be reincarnated for another two thousand," Fafhrd continued.

"He may show us Pan, or offer us to the Elder Gods, or send us back to Lankhmar," the Mouser concluded.

There was a pause of several moments.

Then the Gray Mouser whispered, "Nevertheless, we must visit Ningauble of the Seven Eyes."

And he spoke truly, for as Fafhrd had guessed, his soul was hovering over the sea dreaming of dark-haired Ahura.

2
Ningauble

So they crossed the snowy Lebanons and stole three camels, virtuously choosing to rob a rich landlord who made his tenants milk rocks and sow the shores of the Dead Sea, for it was unwise to approach the Gossiper of the Gods with an overly dirty conscience After seven days of pitching and tossing across the desert, furnace days that made Fafhrd curse Muspelheim's fire gods, in whom he did not believe, they reached the Sand Combers and the Great Sand Whirlpools, and warily slipping

past them while they were only lazily twirling, climbed the Rocky Islet. The city-loving Mouser ranted at Ningauble's preference for "a godforsaken hole in the desert," although he suspected that the Newsmonger and his agents came and went by a more hospitable road than the one provided for visitors, and although he knew as well as Fafhrd that the Snarer of Rumors (especially the false, which are the more valuable) must live as close to India and the infinite garden lands of the Yellow Men as to barbaric Britain and marching Rome, as close to the heaven-steaming trans-Ethiopian jungle as to the mystery of lonely tablelands and star-scraping mountains beyond the Caspian Sea.

With high expectations they tethered their camels, took torches, and fearlessly entered the Bottomless Caves, for it was not so much in the visiting of Ningauble that danger lay as in the tantalizing charm of his advice, which was so great that one had to follow wherever it led.

Nevertheless Fafhrd said, "An earthquake swallowed Ningauble's house and it stuck in his throat. May he not hiccup."

As they were passing over the Trembling Bridge spanning the Pit of Ultimate Truth, which could have devoured the light of ten thousand torches without becoming any less black, they met and edged wordlessly past a helmeted, impassive fellow whom they recognized as a far-journeying Mongol. Safely across, they speculated as to whether he too were a visitor of the Gossiper, or a spy Fafhrd had no faith in the clairvoyant powers of the seven eyes, averring that they were merely a sham to awe fools and that Ningauble's information was gathered by a corps of pedlars. panders, slaves, urchins, eunuchs, and midwives, which outnumbered the grand armies of a dozen kings.

Presently they saw a faint light flickering on the stalactited roof, reflected from a level above them. Soon they were struggling toward it up the Staircase of Error, an agglomeration of great rough rocks. Fafhrd stretched his long legs; the Mouser leapt catlike. The little creatures that scurried about their feet, brushed their shoulders in slow flight, or merely showed their yellow, insatiably curious eyes from crevice and rocky perch, multiplied in number; for they were nearing the Archeavesdropper.

A little later, having wasted no time in reconnoitering, they stood before the Great Gate, whose iron-studded upper reaches disdained the illumination of the tiny fire. It was not the gate,

however, that interested them, but its keeper, a monstrously paunched creature sitting on the floor beside a vast heap of potsherds, and whose only movement was a rubbing of what seemed to be his hands. He kept them under the shabby but voluminous cloak which also completely hooded his head. A third of the way down the cloak, two large bats clung.

Fafhrd cleared his throat.

The movement ceased under the cloak.

Then out of the top of it sinuously writhed something that seemed to be a serpent, only in place of a head it bore an opalescent jewel with a dark central speck. Nevertheless, one might finally have judged it a serpent, were it not that it also resembled a thick-stalked exotic bloom idly waved by an exquisite. It restlessly turned this way and that until it pointed at the two strangers. Then it went rigid and the bulbous extremity seemed to glow more brightly. There came a low purring and five similar stalks twisted rapidly from under the hood and aligned themselves with their companion Then the six black pupils dilated.

"Fat-bellied rumor monger!" hailed the Mouser nervously, "Must you forever play at peep show?"

For one could never quite get over the faint initial uneasiness that came with meeting Ningauble of the Seven Eyes.

"Is it not time," a voice from under the hood thinly quavered, "that you ceased to impose on me, because you once got me an unborn ghoul that I might question it of its parentage? The service to me was slight, accepted only to humor you; and I, by the name of the Spoorless God, have repaid it twenty times over."

"Nonsense, Midwife of Secrets," retorted the Mouser, stepping forward familiarly, his gay impudence almost restored "You know as well as I that deep in your great paunch you are trembling with delight at having a chance to mouth your knowledge to two such appreciative listeners as we."

"That is as far from the truth as I am from the Secret of the Sphinx," commented Ningauble, four of his eyes following the Mouser's advance, one keeping watch on Fafhrd, while the sixth looped back around the hood to reappear on the other side and gaze suspiciously behind them.

"But, Ancient Talebearer, I am sure you have been closer to the Sphinx than any of her stony lovers. Very likely she first received her paltry riddle from your great store."

Ningauble quivered like jelly at this tickling flattery.

"Nevertheless," he piped, "today I am in a merry humor and will give ear to your question. But remember that it will almost certainly be too difficult for me."

"We know your great ingenuity in the face of insurmountable obstacles," rejoined the Mouser in the properly soothing tones.

"Why doesn't your friend come forward?" asked Ningauble, suddenly querulous again.

Fafhrd had been waiting for that question. It always went against his grain to have to behave congenially toward one who called himself the Mightiest Magician as well as the Gossiper of the Gods. But that Ningauble should let hang from his shoulders two bats whom he called Hugin and Munin in open burlesque of Odin's ravens, was too much for him. It was more a patriotic than religious matter with Fafhrd. He believed in Odin only during moments of sentimental weakness.

"Slay the bats or send them slithering and I'll come, but not before," he dogmatized.

"Now I'll tell you nothing," said Ningauble pettishly, "for, as all know, my health will not permit bickering."

"But, Schoolmaster of Falsehood," purred the Mouser, darting a murderous glance at Fafhrd, "that is indeed to be regretted, especially since I was looking forward to regaling you with the intricate scandal that the Friday concubine of the satrap Philip withheld even from her body slave."

"Ah well," conceded the Many-Eyed One, "it is time for Hugin and Munin to feed."

The bats reluctantly unfurled their wings and flew lazily into the darkness.

Fafhrd stirred himself and moved forward, sustaining the scrutiny of the majority of the eyes, all six of which the Northman considered artfully manipulated puppet-orbs. The seventh no man had seen, or boasted of having seen, save the Mouser, who claimed it was Odin's other eye, stolen from sagacious Mimer — this not because he believed it, but to irk his northern comrade.

"Greetings, Snake Eyes," Fafhrd boomed.

"Oh, is it you, Hulk?" said Ningauble carelessly. "Sit down, both, and share my humble fire."

"Are we not to be invited beyond the Great Gate and share your fabulous comforts too?"

"Do not mock me, Gray One. As all know, I am poor, penurious Ningauble."

So with a sigh the Mouser settled himself on his heels, for he well knew that the Gossiper prized above all else a reputation for poverty, chastity, humility, and thrift, therefore playing his own doorkeeper, except on certain days when the Great Gate muted the tinkle of impious sistrum and the lascivious wail of flute and the giggles of those who postured in the shadow shows.

But now Ningauble coughed piteously and seemed to shiver and warmed his cloaked members at the fire. And the shadows flickered weakly against iron and stone, and the little creatures crept rustling in, making their eyes wide to see and their ears cupped to hear; and upon their rhythmically swinging, weaving stalks pulsated the six eyes At intervals, too, Ningauble would pick up, seemingly at random, a potsherd from the great pile and rapidly scan the memorandum scribbled on it, without breaking the rhythm of the eye-stalks or, apparently, the thread of his attention.

As Fafhrd started to speak, Ningauble questioned rapidly, "And now, my children, you had something to tell me concerning the Friday concubine—"

"Ah yes, Artist of Untruth," the Mouser cut in hastily, "concerning not so much the concubine as three eunuch priests of Cybele and a slave-girl from Samos -a tasty affair of wondrous complexity, which you must give me leave to let simmer in my mind so that I may serve it up to you skimmed of the slightest fat of exaggeration and with all the spice of true detail."

"And while we wait for the Mouser's mind-pot to boil," said Fafhrd casually, at last catching the spirit of the thing, "you may the more merrily pass the time by advising us as to a trifling difficulty." And he gave a succinct account of their tantalizing bedevilment by sow- and snail-changed maidens.

"And you say that Chloe alone proved immune to the spell?" queried Ningauble thoughtfully, tossing a potsherd to the far side of the pile. "Now that brings to my mind "

"The exceedingly peculiar remark at the end of Diotima's fourth epistle to Socrates?" interrupted the Mouser brightly. "Am I not right, Father?"

"You are not," replied Ningauble coldly. "As I was about to observe, when this tick of the intellect sought to burrow the skin of my mind, there must be something that throws a protective influence around Chloe. Do you know of any god or demon in whose special favor she stands, or any incantation or rune she habitually mumbles, or any notable talisman, charm, or amulet

she customarily wears or inscribes on her body?"

"She did mention one thing," the Mouser admitted diffidently after a moment. "An amulet given her years ago by some Persian, or Greco-Persian girl. Doubtless a trifle of no consequence."

"Doubtless. Now, when the first sow-change occurred, did Fafhrd laugh the laugh? He did? That was unwise, as I have many times warned you. Advertise often enough your connection with the Elder Gods and you may be sure that some greedy searcher from the pit..."

"But what *is* our connection with the Elder Gods?" asked the Mouser, eagerly, though not hopefully. Fafhrd grunted derisively.

"Those are matters best not spoken of," Ningauble ordained. "Was there anyone who showed a particular interest in Fafhrd's laughter?"

The Mouser hesitated. Fafhrd coughed. Thus prodded, the Mouser confessed, "Oh, there was a girl who was perhaps a trifle more attentive than the others to his bellowing. A Persian girl. In fact, as I recall, the same one who gave Chloe the amulet."

"Her name is Ahura," said Fafhrd. "The Mouser's in love with her."

"A fable!" the Mouser denied laughingly, double-daggering Fafhrd with a surreptitious glare. "I can assure you, Father, that she is a very shy, stupid girl, who cannot possibly be concerned in any way with our troubles."

"Of course, since you say so," Ningauble observed, his voice icily rebuking. "However, I can tell you this much: the one who has placed the ignominious spell upon you is, insofar as he partakes of humanity, a man..."

(The Mouser was relieved. It was unpleasant to think of dark-haired, lithe Ahura being subjected to certain methods of questioning which Ningauble was reputed to employ. He was irked at his own clumsiness in trying to lead Ningauble's attention away from Ahura. Where she was concerned, his wit failed him.)

"...and an adept," Ningauble concluded.

The Mouser started. Fafhrd groaned, "Again?"

"Again," Ningauble affirmed. "Though why, save for your connection with the Elder Gods, you should interest those most recondite of creatures, I cannot guess. They are not men who wittingly will stand in the glaringly illuminated foreground of history. They seek—"

"But who is it?" Fafhrd interjected.

"Be quiet, Mutilator of Rhetoric. They seek the shadows, and surely for good reason. They are the glorious amateurs of high magic, disdaining practical ends, caring only for the satisfaction of their insatiable curiosities, and therefore doubly dangerous. They are..."

"But what's his name?"

"Silence, Trampler of Beautiful Phrases. They are in their fashion fearless, irreligiously considering themselves the co-equals of destiny and having only contempt for the Demigoddess of Chance, the Imp of Luck, and the Demon of Improbability. In short, they are adversaries before whom you should certainly tremble and to whose will you should unquestionably bow."

"But his name, Father, his name!" Fafhrd burst out, and the Mouser, his impudence again in the ascendant, remarked, "It is he of the Sabihoon, is it not, Father?"

"It is not. The Sabihoon are an ignorant fisher folk who inhabit the hither shore of the far lake and worship the beast god Wheen, denying all others," a reply that tickled the Mouser, for to the best of his knowledge he had just invented the Sabihoon.

"No, his name is..." Ningauble paused and began to chuckle. "I was forgetting that I must under no circumstances tell you his name."

Fafhrd jumped up angrily. "What?"

"Yes, Children," said Ningauble, suddenly making his eyestalks staringly rigid, stern, and uncompromising. "And I must furthermore tell you that I can in no way help you in this matter..." (Fafhrd clenched his fists) "...and I am very glad of it too..." (Fafhrd swore) "...for it seems to me that no more fitting punishment could have been devised for your abominable lecheries, which I have so often bemoaned..." (Fafhrd's hand went to his sword hilt) "...in fact, if it had been up to me to chastise you for your manifold vices, I would have chosen the very same enchantment..." (But now he had gone too far; Fafhrd growled, "Oh, so it is you who are behind it!" ripped out his sword and began to advance slowly on the hooded figure) "...Yes, my children, you must accept your lot without rebellion or bitterness..." (Fafhrd continued to advance) "...Far better that you should retire from the world as I have and give yourselves to meditation and repentance...." (The sword, flickering with firelight, was only a yard away) "...Far better that you should live out the rest of this incarnation in

solitude, each surrounded by his faithful band of sows or snails . . ." (The sword touched the ragged robe) ". . . devoting your remaining years to the promotion of a better understanding between mankind and the lower animals. However—" (Ningauble sighed and the sword hesitated) ". . . if it is still your firm and foolhardy intention to challenge this adept, I suppose I must aid you with what little advice I can give, though warning you that it will plunge you into maelstroms of trouble and lay upon you geases you will grow grey in fulfilling, and incidentally be the means of your deaths."

Fafhrd lowered his sword. The silence in the black cave grew heavy and ominous. Then, in a voice that was distant yet resonant, like the sound that came from the statue of Memnon at Thebes when the first rays of the morning sun fell upon it, Ningauble began to speak.

"It comes to me, confusedly, like a scene in a rusted mirror; nevertheless, it comes, and thus: You must first possess yourselves of certain trifles. The shroud of Ahriman, from the secret shrine near Persepolis—"

"But what about the accursed swordsmen of Ahriman, Father?" put in the Mouser. "There are twelve of them. Twelve, Father, and all very accursed and hard to persuade."

"Do you think I am setting toss-and-fetch problems for puppy dogs?" wheezed Ningauble angrily. "To proceed: You must secondly obtain powdered mummy from the Demon Pharaoh, who reigned for three horrid and unhistoried midnights after the death of Ikhnaton "

"But, Father," Fafhrd protested, blushing a little, "you know who owns that powdered mummy, and what she demands of any two men who visit her."

"Shh! I'm your elder, Fafhrd, by eons. Thirdly, you must get the cup from which Socrates drank the hemlock, fourthly a sprig from the original Tree of Life, and lastly . . ." He hesitated as if his memory had failed him, dipped up a potsherd from the pile, and read from it: "And lastly, you must procure the woman who will come when she is ready."

"What woman?"

"The woman who will come when she is ready." Ningauble tossed back the fragment, starting a small landslide of shards.

"Corrode Loki's bones!" cursed Fafhrd, and the Mouser said, "But Father, no woman comes when she's ready. She always waits."

Ningauble sighed merrily and said, "Do not be downcast, Children. Is it ever the custom of your good friend the Gossiper to give simple advice?"

"It is not," said Fafhrd.

"Well, having all these things, you must go to the Lost City of Ahriman that lies east of Armenia— whisper not its name—"

"Is it Khatti?" whispered the Mouser.

"No, Blowfly. And furthermore, why are you interrupting me when you are supposed to be hard at work recalling all the details of the scandal of the Friday concubine, the three eunuch priests, and the slave girl from Samos?"

"Oh truly, Spy of the Unmentionable, I labor at that until my mind becomes a weariness and a wandering, and all for love of you." The Mouser was glad of Ningauble's question, for he had forgotten the three eunuch priests, which would have been most unwise, as no one in his senses sought to cheat the Gossiper of even a pinch of misinformation promised.

Ningauble continued, "Arriving at the Lost City, you must seek out the ruined black shrine, and place the woman before the great tomb, and wrap the shroud of Ahriman around her, and let her drink the powdered mummy from the hemlock cup, diluting it with a wine you will find where you find the mummy, and place in her hand the sprig from the Tree of Life, and wait for the dawn."

"And then?" rumbled Fafhrd.

"And then the mirror becomes all red with rust. I can see no farther, except that someone will return from a place which it is unlawful to leave, and that you must be wary of the woman "

"But Father, all this scavenging of magical trumpery is a great bother," Fafhrd objected. "Why shouldn't we go at once to the Lost City?"

"Without the map on the shroud of Ahriman?" murmured Ningauble.

"And you still can't tell us the name of the adept we seek?" the Mouser ventured "Or even the name of the woman? Puppy dog problems indeed! We give you a bitch, Father, and by the time you return her, she's dropped a litter."

Ningauble shook his head ever so slightly, the six eyes retreated under the hood to become an ominous multiple gleam, and the Mouser felt a shiver crawl on his spine.

"Why is it, Riddle-Vendor, that you always give us half knowledge?" Fafhrd pressed angrily. "Is it that at the last

moment our blades may strike with half force?"

Ningauble chuckled.

"It is because I know you too well, Children. If I said one word more, Hulk, you could be cleaving with your great sword—at the wrong person. And your cat-comrade would be brewing his child's magic—the wrong child's magic. It is no simple creature you foolhardily seek, but a mystery, no single identity but a mirage, a stony thing that has stolen the blood and substance of life, a nightmare crept out of dream."

For a moment it was as if, in the far reaches of that nighted cavern, something that waited stirred. Then it was gone.

Ningauble purred complacently, "And now I have an idle moment, which, to please you, I will pass in giving ear to the story that the Mouser has been impatiently waiting to tell me."

So, there being no escape, the Mouser began, first explaining that only the surface of the story had to do with the concubine, the three priests, and the slave girl; the deeper portion touching mostly, though not entirely, on four infamous handmaidens of Ishtar and a dwarf who was richly compensated for his deformity. The fire grew low and a little, lemurlike creature came edging in to replenish it, and the hours stretched on, for the Mouser always warmed to his own tales. There came a place where Fafhrd's eyes bugged with astonishment, and another where Ningauble's paunch shook like a small mountain in earthquake, but eventually the tale came to an end, suddenly and seemingly in the middle, like a piece of foreign music.

Then farewells were said and final questions refused answer, and the two seekers started back the way they had come. And Ningauble began to sort in his mind the details of the Mouser's story, treasuring it the more because he knew it was an improvisation, his favorite proverb being, "He who lies artistically, treads closer to the truth than ever he knows."

Fafhrd and the Mouser had almost reached the bottom of the boulder stair when they heard a faint tapping and turned to see Ningauble peering down from the verge, supporting himself with what looked like a cane and rapping with another.

"Children," he called, and his voice was tiny as the note of the lone flute in the Temple of Baal, "it comes to me that something in the distant spaces lusts for something in you. You must guard closely what commonly needs no guarding."

"Yes, Godfather of Mystification."

"You will take care?" came the elfin note. "Your beings depend on it."

"Yes, Father."

And Ningauble waved once and hobbled out of sight. The little creatures of his great darkness followed him, but whether to report and receive orders or only to pleasure him with their gentle antics, no man could be sure. Some said that Ningauble had been created by the Elder Gods for men to guess about and so sharpen their imaginations for even tougher riddles. None knew whether he had the gift of foresight, or whether he merely set the stage for future events with such a bewildering cunning that only an efreet or an adept could evade acting the part given him.

3
The Woman Who Came

After Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser emerged from the Bottomless Caves into the blinding upper sunlight, their trail for a space becomes dim. Material relating to them has, on the whole, been scanted by annalists, since they were heroes too disreputable for classic myth, too cryptically independent ever to let themselves be tied to a folk, too shifty and improbable in their adventurings to please the historian, too often involved with a riff-raff of dubious demons, unfrocked sorcerors, and discredited deities —a veritable underworld of the supernatural. And it becomes doubly difficult to piece together their actions during a period when they were engaged in thefts requiring stealth, secrecy, and bold misdirection. Occasionally, however, one comes across the marks they left upon the year.

For instance, a century later the priests of Ahriman were chanting, although they were too intelligent to believe it themselves, the miracle of Ahriman's snatching of his own hallowed shroud. One night the twelve accursed swordsmen saw the blackly scribbled shroud rise like a pillar of cobwebs from the altar, rise higher than mortal man, although the form within seemed anthropoid. Then Ahriman spoke from the shroud, and they worshipped him, and he replied with obscure parables and finally strode giantlike from the secret shrine.

The shrewdest of the century-later priests remarked, "I'd say a man on stilts, or else –" (happy surmise!) " one man on the shoulders of another."

Then there were the things that Nikri, body slave to the

infamous False Laodice, told the cook while she annointed the bruises of her latest beating. Things concerning two strangers who visited her mistress, and the carousal her mistress proposed to them, and how they escaped the black eunuch scimitarmen she had set to slay them when the carousal was done.

"They were magicians, both of them," Nikri averred, "for at the peak of the doings they transformed my lady into a hideous, wiggly-horned sow, a horrid chimera of snail and swine. But that wasn't the worst, for they stole her chest of aphrodisiac wines. When she discovered that the demon mummia was gone with which she'd hoped to stir the lusts of Ptolemy, she screamed in rage and took her backscratcher to me. Ow, but that hurts!"

The cook chuckled.

But as to who visited Hieronymus, the greedy tax farmer and connoisseur of Antioch, or in what guise, we cannot be sure. One morning he was found in his treasure room with his limbs stiff and chill, as if from hemlock, and there was a look of terror on his fat face, and the famous cup from which he had often caroused was missing, although there were circular stains on the table before him. He recovered, but would never tell what had happened.

The priests who tended the Tree of Life in Babylon were a little more communicative One evening just after sunset they saw the topmost branches shake in the gloaming and heard the snick of a pruning knife. All around them, without other sound or movement, stretched the desolate city, from which the inhabitants had been herded to nearby Seleucia three-quarters of a century before and to which the priests crept back only in great fear to fulfill their sacred duties. They instantly prepared, some of them to climb the Tree armed with tempered golden sickles, others to shoot down with gold-tipped arrows whatever blasphemer was driven forth, when suddenly a large gray batlike shape swooped from the Tree and vanished behind a jagged wall. Of course, it might conceivably have been a gray-cloaked man swinging on a thin, tough rope, but there were too many things whispered about the creatures that flapped by night through the ruins of Babylon for the priests to dare pursuit.

Finally Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser reappeared in Tyre, and a week later they were ready to depart on the ultimate stage of their quest. Indeed, they were already outside the gates, lingering at the landward end of Alexander's mole, spine of an ever-growing isthmus. Gazing at it, Fafhrd remembered how

once an unintroduced stranger had told him a tale about two fabulous adventurers who had aided mightily in the foredoomed defense of Tyre against Alexander the Great more than a hundred years ago. The larger had heaved heavy stone blocks on the attacking ships, the smaller had dove to file through the chains with which they were anchored. Their names, the stranger had said, were Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser. Fafhrd had made no comment.

It was near evening, a good time to pause in adventurings, to recall past escapades, to hazard misty, wild, rosy speculations concerning what lay ahead.

"I think any woman would do," insisted the Mouser bickering. "Ningauble was just trying to be obscure. Let's take Chloe."

"If only she'll come when she's ready," said Fafhrd, half smiling.

The sun was dipping ruddy-golden into the rippling sea. The merchants who had pitched shop on the landward side in order to get first crack at the farmers and inland traders on market day were packing up wares and taking down canopies.

"Any woman will eventually come when she's ready, even Chloe," retorted the Mouser. "We'd only have to take along a silk tent for her and a few pretty conveniences. No trouble at all."

"Yes," said Fafhrd, "We could probably manage it without more than one elephant."

Most of Tyre was darkly silhouetted against the sunset, although there were gleams from the roofs here and there, and the gilded peak of the Temple of Melkarth sent a little water-borne glitter track angling in toward the greater one of the sun. The fading Phoenician port seemed entranced, dreaming of past glories, only half listening to today's news of Rome's implacable eastward advance, and Philip of Macedon's loss of the first round at the Battle of the Dog's Heads, and now Antiochus preparing for the second, with Hannibal come to help him from Tyre's great fallen sister Carthage across the sea.

"I'm sure Chloe will come if we wait until tomorrow," the Mouser continued. "We'll have to wait in any case, because Ningauble said the woman wouldn't come until she was ready."

A cool little wind came out of the wasteland that was Old Tyre. The merchants hurried; a few of them were already going home along the mole, their slaves looking like hunchbacks and

otherwise misshapen monsters because of the packs on their shoulders and heads.

"No," said Fafhrd, "we'll start. And if the woman doesn't come when she's ready, then she isn't the woman who will come when she's ready, or if she is, she'll have to hump herself to catch up."

The three horses of the adventurers moved restlessly and the Mouser's whinnied. Only the great camel, on which were slung the wine-sacks, various small chests, and snugly-wrapped weapons, stood sullenly still. Fafhrd and the Mouser casually watched the one figure on the mole that moved against the homing stream; they were not exactly suspicious, but after the year's doings they could not overlook the possibility of death-dealing pursuers, taking the form either of accursed swordsmen, black eunuch scimitarmen, gold-weaponed Babylonian priests, or such agents as Hieronymus of Antioch might favor.

"Chloe would have come on time, if only you'd helped me persuade her," argued the Mouser. "She likes you, and I'm sure she must have been the one Ningauble meant, because she has that amulet which works against the adept."

The sun was a blinding sliver on the sea's rim, then went under. All the little glares and glitters on the roofs of Tyre winked out. The Temple of Melkarth loomed black against the fading sky. The last canopy was being taken down and most of the merchants were more than halfway across the mole. There was still only one figure moving shoreward.

"Weren't seven nights with Chloe enough for you?" asked Fafhrd. "Besides, it isn't she you'll be wanting when we kill the adept and get this spell off us."

"That's as it may be," retorted the Mouser. "But remember we have to catch our adept first. And it's not only I whom Chloe's company could benefit."

A faint shout drew their attention across the darkling water to where a lateen-rigged trader was edging into the Egyptian Harbor. For a moment they thought the landward end of the mole had been emptied. Then the figure moving away from the city came out sharp and black against the sea, a slight figure, not burdened like the slaves.

"Another fool leaves sweet Tyre at the wrong time," observed the Mouser. "Just think what a woman will mean in those cold mountains we're going to, Fafhrd, a woman to prepare dainties and stroke your forehead."

Fafhrd said, "It isn't your forehead, little man, you're thinking of."

The cool wind came again and the packed sand moaned at its passing. Tyre seemed to crouch like a beast against the threats of darkness. A last merchant searched the ground hurriedly for some lost article.

Fafhrd put his hand on his horse's shoulder and said, "Come on."

The Mouser made a last point. "I don't think Chloe would insist on taking the slave girl to oil her feet, that is, if we handled it properly."

Then they saw that the other fool leaving sweet Tyre was coming toward them, and that it was a woman, tall and slender, dressed in stuffs that seemed to melt into the waning light, so that Fafhrd found himself wondering whether she truly came from Tyre or from some aerial realm whose inhabitants may venture to earth only at sunset. Then, as she continued to approach at an easy, swinging stride, they saw that her face was fair and that her hair was raven; and the Mouser's heart gave a great leap and he felt that this was the perfect consummation of their waiting, that he was witnessing the birth of an Aphrodite, not from the foam but the dusk; for it was indeed his dark-haired Ahura of the wine shops, no longer staring with cold, shy curiosity, but eagerly smiling.

Fafhrd, not altogether untouched by similar feelings, said slowly, "So you are the woman who came when she was ready?"

"Yes," added the Mouser gayly. "And did you know that in a minute more you'd have been too late?"

4
The Lost City

During the next week, one of steady northward journeying along the fringe of the desert, they learned little more of the motives or history of their mysterious companion than the dubious scraps of information Chloe had provided. When asked why she had come, Ahura replied that Ningauble had sent her, that Ningauble had nothing to do with it and that it was all an accident, that certain dead Elder Gods had dreamed her a vision, that she sought a brother lost in a search for the Lost City of

Ahriman; and often her only answer was silence, a silence that seemed sometimes sly and sometimes mystical. However, she stood up well to hardship, proved a tireless rider, and did not complain at sleeping on the ground with only a large cloak snuggled around her. Like some especially sensitive migratory bird, she seemed possessed of an even greater urge than their own to get on with the journey.

Whenever opportunity offered, the Mouser paid assiduous court to her, limited only by the fear of working a snail-change. But after a few days of this tantalizing pleasure, he noticed that Fafhrd was vying for it. Very swiftly the two comrades became rivals, contesting as to who should be the first to offer Ahura assistance on those rare occasions when she needed it, striving to top each other's brazenly boastful accounts of incredible adventures, constantly on the alert lest the other steal a moment alone. Such a spate of gallantry had never before been known on their adventurings. They remained good friends—and they were aware of that—but very surly friends and they were aware of that too. And Ahura's shy, or sly, silence encouraged them both.

They forded the Euphrates south of the ruins of Carchemish, and struck out for the headwaters of the Tigris, intersecting but swinging east away from the route of Xenophon and the Ten Thousand. It was then that their surliness came to a head. Ahura had roamed off a little, letting her horse crop the dry herbage, while the two sat on a boulder, and expostulated in whispers, Fafhrd proposing that they both agree to cease paying court to the girl until their quest was over, the Mouser doggedly advancing his prior claim. Their whispers became so heated that they did not notice a white pigeon swooping toward them until it landed with a downward beat of wings on an arm Fafhrd had flung wide to emphasize his willingness to renounce the girl temporarily if only the Mouser would.

Fafhrd blinked, then detached a scrap of parchment from the pigeon's leg, and read, "There is danger in the girl. You must both forgo her."

The tiny seal was an impression of seven tangled eyes.

"Just *seven* eyes!" remarked the Mouser. "Pah, He is modest!" And for a moment he was silent, trying to picture the gigantic web of unknown strands by which the Gossiper gathered his information and conducted his business.

But this unexpected seconding of Fafhrd's argument finally won from him a sulky consent, and they solemnly pledged not to

lay hand on the girl, or each in any way to further his cause, until they had found and dealt with the adept.

They were now in a townless land that caravans avoided, a land like Xenophon's, full of chill misty mornings, dazzling noons, and treacherous twilights with hints of shy, murderous, mountain-dwelling tribes recalling the omnipresent legends of "little people" as unlike men as cats are unlike dogs. Ahura seemed unaware of the sudden cessation of the attentions paid her, remaining as provocatively shy and indefinite as ever.

The Mouser's attitude toward Ahura, however, began to undergo a gradual but profound change. Whether it was the souring of his inhibited passion, or the shrewder insight of a mind no longer abubble with the fashioning of compliments and witticisms, he began to feel more and more that the Ahura he loved was only a faint spark almost lost in the darkness of a stranger who daily became more riddlesome, dubious, and even, in the end, repellent. He remembered the other name Chloe had given Ahura, and found himself brooding oddly over the legend of Hermaphroditus bathing in the Carian fountain and becoming joined in one body with the nymph Salmacis. Now when he looked at Ahura he could see only the avid eyes that peered secretly at the world through a crevice. He began to think of her chuckling soundlessly at night at the mortifying spell that had been laid upon himself and Fafhrd. He became obsessed with Ahura in a very different way, and took to spying on her and studying her expression when she was not looking, as if hoping in that way to penetrate her mystery.

Fafhrd noticed it and instantly suspected that the Mouser was contemplating going back on his pledge. He restrained his indignation with difficulty and took to watching the Mouser as closely as the Mouser watched Ahura. No longer when it became necessary to procure provisions was either willing to hunt alone. The easy amicability of their friendship deteriorated. Then, late one afternoon while they were traversing a shadowy ravine east of Armenia, a hawk dove suddenly and sank its talons in Fafhrd's shoulder. The Northerner killed the creature in a flurry of reddish feathers before he noticed that it too carried a message.

"Watch out for the Mouser," was all it said, but coupled with the smart of the talon-pricks, that was quite enough for Fafhrd. Drawing up beside the Mouser while Ahura's horse pranced skittishly away from the disturbance, he told the Mouser his full

suspicions and warned him that any violation of their agreement would at once end their friendship and bring them into deadly collision.

The Mouser listened like a man in a dream, still moodily watching Ahura. He would have liked to have told Fafhrd his real motives, but was doubtful whether he could make them intelligible. Moreover, he was piqued at being misjudged. So when Fafhrd's direful outburst was finished, he made no comment. Fafhrd interpreted this as an admission of guilt and cantered on in a rage.

They were now nearing that rugged vantage-land from which the Medes and the Persians had swooped down on Assyria and Chaldea, and where, if they could believe Ningauble's geography, they would find the forgotten lair of the Lord of Eternal Evil. At first the archaic map on the shroud of Ahriman proved more maddening than helpful, but after a while, clarified in part by a curiously erudite suggestion of Ahura, it began to make disturbing sense, showing them a deep gorge where the foregoing terrain led one to expect a saddle-backed crest, and a valley where ought to have been a mountain. If the map held true, they would reach the Lost City in a very few days.

All the while, the Mouser's obsession deepened, and at last took definite and startling form. He believed that Ahura was a man.

It was very strange that the intimacy of camp life and the Mouser's own zealous spying should not long ago have turned up concrete proof or disproof of this clearcut supposition. Nevertheless, as the Mouser wonderingly realized on reviewing events, they had not. Granted, Ahura's form and movements, all her least little actions were those of a woman, but he recalled painted and padded minions, sweet not simpering, who had aped femininity almost as well. Preposterous—but there it was. From that moment his obsessive curiosity became a compulsive sweat and he redoubled his moody peering, much to the anger of Fafhrd, who took to slapping his sword hilt at unexpected intervals, though without ever startling the Mouser into looking away. Each in his way stayed as surly-sullen as the camel that displayed a more and more dour balkiness at this preposterous excursion from the healthy desert.

Those were nightmare days for the Gray One, as they advanced ever closer through gloomy gorges and over craggy crests toward Ahriman's primeval shrine. Fafhrd seemed an

ominous, white-faced giant reminding him of someone he had known in waking life, and their whole quest a blind treading of the more subterranean routes of dream. He still wanted to tell the giant his suspicions, but could not bring himself to it, because of their monstrousness and because the giant loved Ahura. And all the while Ahura eluded him, a phantom fluttering just beyond reach; though, when he forced his mind to make the comparison, he realized that her behavior had in no way altered, except for an intensification of the urge to press onward, like a vessel nearing its home port.

Finally there came a night when he could bear his torturing curiosity no longer. He writhed from under a mountain of oppressive unremembered dreams and, propped on an elbow, looked around him, quiet as the creature for which he was named.

It would have been cold if it had not been so still. The fire had burned to embers It was rather the moonlight that showed him Fafhrd's touseled head and elbow outthrust from shaggy bearskin cloak. And it was the moonlight that struck full on Ahura stretched beyond the embers, her lidded, tranquil face fixed on the zenith, seeming hardly to breathe.

He waited a long time. Then, without making a sound, he laid back his gray cloak, picked up his sword, went around the fire, and kneeled beside her. Then, for another space, he dispassionately scrutinized her face. But it remained the hermaphroditic mask that had tormented his waking hours—if he were still sure of the distinction between waking and dream. Suddenly his hands grasped at her and as abruptly checked. Again he stayed motionless for a long time. Then, with movements as deliberate and rehearsed-seeming as a sleep-walker's, but more silent, he drew back her woolen cloak, took a small knife from his pouch, lifted her gown at the neck, careful not to touch her skin, slit it to her knee, treating her chiton the same.

The breasts, white as ivory, that he had known would not be there, were there. And yet, instead of his nightmare lifting, it deepened.

It was something too profound for surprise, this wholly unexpected further insight. For as he knelt there, somberly studying, he knew for a certainty that this ivory flesh too was a mask, as cunningly fashioned as the face and for as frighteningly incomprehensible a purpose.

The ivory eyelids did not flicker, but the edges of the teeth

showed in what he fancied was a deliberate, flickery smile.

He was never more certain than at this moment that Ahura was a man.

The embers crunched behind him.

Turning, the Mouser saw only the streak of gleaming steel poised above Fafhrd's head, motionless for a moment, as if with superhuman forbearance a god should give his creature a chance before loosing the thunderbolt.

The Mouser ripped out his own slim sword in time to ward the titan blow. From hilt to point, the two blades screamed.

And in answer to that scream, melting into, continuing, and augmenting it, there came from the absolute calm of the west a gargantuan gust of wind that sent the Mouser staggering forward and Fafhrd reeling back, and rolled Ahura across the place where the embers had been.

Almost as suddenly the gale died. As it died, something whipped batlike toward the Mouser's face and he grabbed at it. But it was not a bat, or even a large leaf. It felt like papyrus.

The embers, blown into a clump of dry grass, had perversely started a blaze To its flaring light he held the thin scrap that had fluttered out of the infinite west.

He motioned frantically to Fafhrd, who was clawing his way out of a scrub pine.

There was squid-black writing on the scrap, in large characters, above the tangled seal.

"By whatever gods you revere, give up this quarrel. Press onward at once. Follow the woman."

They became aware that Ahura was peering over their abutting shoulders. The moon came gleamingly from behind the small black tatter of cloud that had briefly obscured it. She looked at them, pulled together chiton and gown, belted them with her cloak. They collected their horses, extricated the fallen camel from the cluster of thorn bushes in which it was satisfiedly tormenting itself, and set out.

After that the Lost City was found almost too quickly; it seemed like a trap or the work of an illusionist. One moment Ahura was pointing out to them a boulder-studded crag; the next, they were looking down on a narrow valley choked with crazily-leaning, moonsilvered monoliths and their accomplice shadows.

From the first it was obvious that "city" was a misnomer. Surely men had never dwelt in those massive stone tents and

huts, though they may have worshipped there. It was a habitation for Egyptian colossi, for stone automata. But Fafhrd and the Mouser had little time to survey its entirety, for without warning Ahura sent her horse clattering and sliding down the slope.

Thereafter it was a harebrained, drunken gallop, their horses plunging shadows, the camel a lurching ghost, through forests of crude-hewn pillars, past teetering single slabs big enough for palace walls, under lintels made for elephants, always following the elusive hoofbeat, never catching it, until they suddenly emerged into clear moonlight and drew up in an open space between a great sarcophagus-like block or box with steps leading up to it, and a huge, crudely man-shaped monolith.

But they had hardly begun to puzzle out the things around them before they became aware that Ahura was gesturing impatiently. They recalled Ningauble's instructions, and realized that it was almost dawn. So they unloaded various bundles and boxes from the shivering, snapping camel, and Fafhrd unfolded the dark, cobwebby shroud of Ahriman and wrapped it around Ahura as she stood wordlessly facing the tomb, her face a marble portrait of eagerness, as if she sprang from the stone around her.

While Fafhrd busied himself with other things, the Mouser opened the ebony chest they had stolen from the False Laodice. A fey mood came upon him, and dancing cumbrously in imitation of a eunuch serving man, he tastefully arrayed a flat stone with all the little jugs and jars and tiny amphorae that the chest contained. And in an appropriate falsetto he sang:

"I laid a board for the Great Seleuce,
I decked it pretty and abstruse;
And he must have been pleased,
For when stuffed, he wheezed,
'As punishment castrate the man.'"

Then Fafhrd handed him Socrates' cup and, still prancing and piping, the Mouser measured into it the mummy powder and added the wine and stirred them together and, dancing fantastically toward Ahura, offered it to her. When she made no movement, he held it to her lips and she greedily gulped it without taking her eyes from the tomb

Then Fafhrd came with the sprig from the Babylonian Tree

of Life, which still felt marvellously fresh and firm-leafed to his touch, as if the Mouser had only snipped it a moment ago. And he gently pried open her clenched fingers and placed the sprig inside them and folded them again.

Thus ready, they waited. The sky reddened at the edge and seemed for a moment to grow darker, the stars fading and the moon turning dull. The outspread aphrodisiacs chilled, refusing the night breeze their savor. And the woman continued to watch the tomb, and behind her, seeming to watch the tomb too, as if it were her fantastic shadow, loomed the man-shaped monolith, which the Mouser now and then scrutinized uneasily over his shoulder, being unable to tell whether it were of primevally crude workmanship or something that men had laboriously defaced because of its evil.

The sky paled until the Mouser could begin to make out some monstrous carvings on the side of the sarcophagus — of men like stone pillars and animals like mountains—and until Fafhrd could see the green of the leaves in Ahura's hand.

Then he saw something astounding. In an instant the leaves withered and the sprig became a curled and blackened stick. In the same instant Ahura trembled and grew paler still, snow pale, and to the Mouser it seemed that there was a tenuous black cloud forming around her head, that the riddlesome stranger he hated was pouring upward like a smoky jinni from her body, the bottle.

The thick stone cover of the sarcophagus groaned and began to rise.

Ahura began to move toward the sarcophagus. To the Mouser it seemed that the cloud was drawing her along like a black sail.

The cover was moving more swiftly, as if it were the upper jaw of a stone crocodile. The black cloud seemed to the Mouser to strain triumphantly toward the widening slit, dragging the white wisp behind it. The cover opened wide. Ahura reached the top and then either peered down inside or, as the Mouser saw it, was almost sucked in along with the black cloud. She shook violently. Then her body collapsed like an empty dress.

Fafhrd gritted his teeth, a joint cracked in the Mouser's wrist. The hilts of their swords, unconsciously drawn, bruised their palms.

Then, like an idler from a day of bowered rest, an Indian prince from the tedium of the court, a philosopher from

quizzical discourse, a slim figure rose from the tomb. His limbs were clad in black, his body in silvery metal, his hair and beard raven and silky. But what first claimed the sight, like an ensign on a masked man's shield, was a chatoyant quality of his youthful olive skin, a silvery gleaming that turned one's thoughts to fishes' bellies and leprosy that, and a certain familiarity.

For the face of this black and silver stranger bore an unmistakable resemblance to Ahura.

5
Anra Devadoris

Resting his long hands on the edge of the tomb, the newcomer surveyed them pleasantly and nodded as if they were intimates. Then he vaulted lightly over and came striding down the steps, treading on the shroud of Ahriman without so much as a glance at Ahura.

He eyed their swords. "You anticipate danger?" he asked, politely stroking the beard which, it seemed to the Mouser, could never have grown so bushily silky except in a tomb.

"You are an adept?" Fafhrd retorted, stumbling over the words a little.

The stranger disregarded the question and stopped to study amusedly the zany array of aphrodisiacs.

"Dear Ningauble," he murmured, "is surely the father of all seven-eyed Lechers. I suppose you know him well enough to guess that he had you fetch these toys because he wants them for himself. Even in his duel with me, he cannot resist the temptation of a profit on the side. But perhaps this time the old pander had curtsied to destiny unwittingly At least, let us hope so."

And with that he unbuckled his sword belt and carelessly laid it by, along with the wondrously slim, silver-hilted sword. The Mouser shrugged and sheathed his own weapon, but Fafhrd only grunted.

"I do not like you," he said. "Are you the one who put the swine-curse on us?"

The stranger regarded him quizzically.

"You are looking for a cause," he said. "You wish to know the

name of an agent you feel has injured you. You plan to unleash your rage as soon as you know. But behind every cause is another cause, and behind the last agent is yet another agent. An immortal could not slay a fraction of them. Believe me, who have followed that trail farther than most and who have had some experience of the special obstacles that are placed in the way of one who seeks to live beyond the confines of his skull and the meager present—the traps that are set for him, the titanic enmities he awakens. I beseech you to wait a while before warring, as I shall wait before answering your second question. That I am an adept I freely admit."

At this last statement the Mouser felt another light-headed impulse to behave fantastically, this time in mimicry of a magician. Here was the rare creature on whom he could test the rune against adepts in his pouch! He wanted to hum a death spell between his teeth, to flap his arms in an incantational gesture, to spit at the adept and spin widdershins on his left heel thrice. But he too chose to wait.

"There is always a simple way of saying things," said Fafhrd ominously.

"But there is where I differ with you," returned the adept, almost animatedly. "There are no ways of saying certain things, and others are so difficult that a man pines and dies before the right words are found. One must borrow phrases from the sky, words from beyond the stars. Else were all an ignorant, imprisoning mockery."

The Mouser stared at the adept, suddenly conscious of a monstrous incongruity about him—as if one should glimpse a hint of double-dealing in the curl of Solon's lips, or cowardice in the eyes of Alexander, or imbecility in the face of Aristotle. For although the adept was obviously erudite, confident, and powerful, the Mouser could not help thinking of a child morbidly avid for experience, a timid, painfully curious small boy. And the Mouser had the further bewildering feeling that this was the secret for which he had spied so long on Ahura.

Fafhrd's sword-arm bulged and he seemed about to make an even pithier rejoinder. But instead he sheathed his sword, walked over to the woman, held his fingers to her wrists for a moment, then tucked his bearskin cloak around her.

"Her ghost has gone only a little way," he said. "It will soon return. What did you do to her, you black and silver popinjay?"

"What matters what I've done to her or you, or me?" retorted the adept, almost peevishly. "You are here, and I have business

with you." He paused. "This, in brief, is my proposal: that I make you adepts like myself, sharing with you all knowledge of which your minds are capable, on condition only that you continue to submit to such spells as I have put upon you and may put upon you in future, to further our knowledge What do you say to that?"

"Wait, Fafhrd!" implored the Mouser, grabbing his comrade's arm "Don't strike yet. Let's first look at the statue from all sides. Why, magnanimous magician, have you chosen to make this offer to us, and why have you brought us out here to make it, instead of getting your yes or no in Tyre?"

"An adept," roared Fafhrd, dragging the Mouser along. "Offers to make me an adept! And for that I should go on kissing swine! Go spit down Fenris' throat!"

"As to why I have brought you here " said the adept coolly, "there are certain limitations on my powers of movement, or at least on my powers of satisfactory communication. There is, moreover, a special reason, which I will reveal to you as soon as we have concluded our agreement--though I may tell you that, unknown to yourselves, you have already aided me."

"But why pick on *us*? Why?" persisted the Mouser, bracing himself against Fafhrd's tugging.

"Some whys, if you follow them far enough, lead over the rim of reality," replied the black and silver one. "I have sought knowledge beyond the dreams of ordinary men, I have ventured far into the darkness that encircles minds and stars. But now, midmost of the pitchy windings of that fearsome labyrinth, I find myself suddenly at my skein's end. The tyrant powers who ignorantly guard the secret of the universe without knowing what it is, have scented me Those vile wardens of whom Ningauble is the merest agent and even Ormadz a cloudy symbol, have laid their traps and built their barricades. And my best torches have snuffed out, or proved too flickery-feeble. I need new avenues of knowledge."

He turned upon them eyes that seemed to be changing to twin holes in a curtain. "There is something in the inmost core of you, something that you, or others before you, have close-guarded down the ages. Something that lets you laugh in a way that only the Elder Gods ever laughed. Something that makes you see a kind of jest in horror and disillusionment and death. There is much wisdom to be gained by the unravelling of that something."

"Do you think us pretty woven scarves for your slick fingers

to fray," snarled Fafhrd. "So you can piece out that rope you're at the end of, and climb all the way down to Niflheim?"

"Each adept must fray himself, before he may fray others," the stranger intoned unsmilingly. "You do not know the treasure you keep virgin and useless within you, or spill in senseless laughter. There is much richness in it, many complexities, destiny-threads that lead beyond the sky to realms undreamt." His voice became swift and invoking. "Have you no itch to understand, no urge for greater adventuring than schoolboy rambles? I'll give you gods for foes, stars for your treasure-trove, if only you will do as I command. All men will be your animals; the best, your hunting pack. Kiss snails and swine? That's but an overture. Greater than Pan, you'll frighten nations, rape the world. The universe will tremble at your lust, but you will master it and force it down. That ancient laughter will give you the might—"

"Filth-spewing pimp! Scabby-lipped pander! Cease!" bellowed Fafhrd.

"Only submit to me and to my will," the adept continued rapturously, his lips working so that his black beard twitched rhythmically. "All things we'll twist and torture, know their cause. The lechery of gods will pave the way we'll tramp through windy darkness 'til we find the one who lurks in senseless Odin's skull twitching the strings that move your lives and mine. All knowledge will be ours, all for us three. Only give up your wills, submit to me!"

For a moment the Mouser was hypnotized by the glint of ghastly wonders. Then he felt Fafhrd's biceps, which had slackened under his grasp—as if the Northerner were yielding too suddenly tighten, and from his own lips he heard words projected coldly into the echoing silence.

"Do you think a rhyme is enough to win us over to your nauseous titillations? Do you think we care a jot for your high-flown muck-peering? Fafhrd, this slobberer offends me, past ills that he has done us aside. It only remains to determine which one of us disposes of him. I long to unravel him, beginning with the ribs."

"Do you not understand what I have offered you, the magnitude of the boon? Have we no common ground?"

"Only to fight on. Call up your demons, sorcerer, or else look to your weapon."

An unearthly lust receded, rippling from the adept's eyes,

leaving behind only a deadliness. Fafhrd snatched up the cup of Socrates and dropped it for a lot, swore as it rolled toward the Mouser, whose cat-quick hand went softly to the hilt of the slim sword called Scalpel. Stooping, the adept groped blindly behind him and regained his belt and scabbard, drawing from it a blade that looked as delicate and responsive as a needle. He stood, a lank and icy indolence, in the red of the risen sun, the black anthropomorphic monolith looming behind him for his second.

The Mouser drew Scalpel silently from its sheath, ran a finger caressingly down the side of the blade, and in so doing noticed an inscription in black crayon which read. "I do not approve of this step you are taking. Ningauble." With a hiss of annoyance the Mouser wiped it off on his thigh and concentrated his gaze on the adept—so preoccupiedly that he did not observe the eyes of the fallen Ahura quiver open.

"And now, Dead Sorcerer," said the Gray One lightly, "my name is the Gray Mouser."

"And mine is Anra Devadoris."

Instantly the Mouser put into action his carefully weighed plan: to take two rapid skips forward and launch his blade-tipped body at the adept's sword, which was to be deflected, and at the adept's throat, which was to be sliced. He was already seeing the blood spurt when, in the middle of the second skip, he saw, whirring like an arrow toward his eyes, the adept's blade. With a belly-contorted effort he twisted to one side and parried blindly. The adept's blade whipped in greedily around Scalpel, but only far enough to snag and tear the skin at the side of the Mouser's neck. The Mouser recovered balance crouching, his guard wide open, and only a backward leap saved him from Anra Devadoris' second serpentlike strike. As he gathered himself to meet the next attack, he gaped amazedly, for never before in his life had he been faced by superior speed. Fafhrd's face was white. Ahura, however, her head raised a little from the furry cloak, smiled with a weak and incredulous, but evil joy—a frankly vicious joy wholly unlike her former sly, intangible intimations of cruelty.

But Anra Devadoris smiled wider and nodded with a patronizing gratefulness at the Mouser, before gliding in. And now it was the blade Needle that darted in unhurried lightning attack, and Scalpel that whirred in frenzied defense. The Mouser retreated in jerky, circling stages, his face sweaty, his throat hot, but his heart exulting, for never before had he fought

this well not even on that stifling morning when, his head in a sack, he had disposed of a whimsically cruel Egyptian kidnaper.

Inexplicably, he had the feeling that his days spent in spying on Ahura were now paying off.

Needle came slipping in and for the moment the Mouser could not tell upon which side of Scalpel it skirred and so sprang backward, but not swiftly enough to escape a prick in the side. He cut viciously at the adept's withdrawing arm – and barely managed to jerk his own arm out of the way of a stop thrust.

In a nasty voice so low that Fafhrd hardly heard her, and the Mouser heard her not at all, Ahura called, "The spiders tickled your flesh ever so lightly as they ran, Anra."

Perhaps the adept hesitated almost imperceptibly, or perhaps it was only that his eyes grew a shade emptier. At all events, the Mouser was not given that opportunity, for which he was desperately searching, to initiate a counterattack and escape the deadly whirligig of his circling retreat. No matter how intently he peered, he could spy no gap in the sword-woven steel net his adversary was tirelessly casting towards him, nor could he discern in the face behind the net any betraying grimace, any flicker of eye hinting at the next point of attack, any flaring of nostrils or distension of lips telling of gasping fatigue similar to his own. It was inhuman, unalive, the mask of a machine built by some Daedalus, or of a leprously silver automaton stepped out of myth. And like a machine, Devadoris seemed to be gaining strength and speed from the very rhythm that was sapping his own.

The Mouser realized that he must interrupt that rhythm by a counterattack, any counterattack, or fall victim to a swiftness become blinding.

And then he further realized that the proper opportunity for that counterattack would never come, that he would wait in vain for any faltering in his adversary's attack, that he must risk everything on a guess.

His throat burned, his heart pounded on his ribs for air, a stinging, numbing poison seeped through his limbs.

Devadoris started a feint, or a deadly thrust, at his face.

Simultaneously, the Mouser heard Ahura jeer, "They hung their webs on your beard and the worms knew your secret parts, Anra."

He guessed—and cut at the adept's knee.

Either he guessed right, or else something halted the adept's deadly thrust.

The adept easily parried the Mouser's cut, but the rhythm was broken and his speed slackened.

Again he developed speed, again at the last possible moment the Mouser guessed. Again Ahura eerily jeered, "The maggots made you a necklace and each marching beetle paused to peer into your eye, Anra."

Over and over it happened, speed, guess macabre jeer, but each time the Mouser gained only momentary respite, never the opportunity to start an extended counterattack. His circling retreat continued so uninterruptedly that he felt as if he had been caught in a whirlpool. With each revolution, certain fixed landmarks swept into view: Fafhrd's blanched agonized face; the hulking tomb, Ahura's hate-contorted, mocking visage; the red stab of the risen sun, the gouged, black, somber monolith, with its attendant stony soldiers and their gigantic stone tents; Fafhrd again....

And now the Mouser knew his strength was failing for good and all. Each guessed counterattack brought him less respite, was less of a check to the adept's speed. The landmarks whirled dizzily, darkened. It was as if he had been sucked to the maelstrom's center, as if the black cloud which he had fancied pouring from Ahura were enveloping him vampirously, choking off his breath.

He knew that he would be able to make only one more counter-cut, and must therefore stake all on a thrust at the heart.

He readied himself.

But he had waited too long. He could not gather the necessary strength, summon the speed.

He saw the adept preparing the lightning death-stroke.

His own thrust was like the gesture of a paralyzed man seeking to rise from his bed.

Then Ahura began to laugh.

It was a horrible, hysterical laugh; a giggling, snikering laugh; a laugh that made him dully wonder why she should find such joy in his death; and yet, for all the difference, a laugh that sounded like a shrill, distorted echo of Fafhrd's or his own.

Puzzledly, he noted that Needle had not yet transfixed him, that Devadoris' lightning thrust was slowing, slowing, as if the hateful laughter were falling in cumbering swathes around the adept, as if each horrid peal dropped a chain around his limbs.

The Mouser leaned on his own sword and collapsed, rather than lunged, forward.

He heard Fafhrd's shuddering sigh.

Then he realized that he was trying to pull Scalpel from the adept's chest and that it was an almost insuperably difficult task, although the blade had gone in as easily as if Anra Devadoris had been a hollow man. Again he tugged, and Scalpel came clear, fell from his nerveless fingers. His knees shook, his head sagged, and darkness flooded everything.

Fafhrd, sweat-drenched, watched the adept. Anra Devadoris' rigid body teetered like a stone pillar, slim cousin to the monolith behind him. His lips were fixed in a frozen, foreknowing smile. The teetering increased, yet for a while, as if he were an incarnation of death's ghastly pendulum, he did not fall. Then he swayed too far forward and fell like a pillar, without collapse. There was a horrid, hollow crash as his head struck the black pavement.

Ahura's hysterical laughter burst out afresh.

Fafhrd ran forward calling to the Mouser, anxiously shook the slumped form. Snores answered him. Like some spent Theban phalanxman drowsing over his pike in the twilight of the battle, the Mouser was sleeping the sleep of complete exhaustion. Fafhrd found the Mouser's gray cloak, wrapped it around him, and gently laid him down.

Ahura was shaking convulsively.

Fafhrd looked at the fallen adept, lying there so formally outstretched, like a tomb-statue rolled over. Dead, Devadoris' lankness was skeletal. He had bled hardly at all from the wound given him by Scalpel, but his forehead was crushed like an eggshell. Fafhrd touched him. The skin was cold, the muscles hard as stone.

Fafhrd had seen men go rigid immediately upon death—Macedonians who had fought too desperately and too long. But they had become weak and staggering toward the end. Anra Devadoris had maintained the appearance of ease and perfect control up to the last moment, despite the poisons that must have been coursing through his veins almost to the exclusion of blood. All through the duel, his chest had hardly heaved.

"By Odin crucified!" Fafhrd muttered. "He was something of a man, even though he was an adept."

A hand was laid on his arm. He jerked around. It was Ahura come behind him. The whites showed around her eyes. She smiled at him crookedly, then lifted a knowing eyebrow, put her finger to her lips, and dropped suddenly to her knees beside the adept's corpse. Gingerly she touched the satin smooth surface of

the tiny blood-clot on the adept's breast. Fafhrd, noting afresh the resemblance between the dead and the crazy face, sucked in his breath. Ahura scurried off like a startled cat

Suddenly she froze like a dancer and looked back at him, and a gloating, transcendent vindictiveness came into her face. She beckoned to Fafhrd. Then she ran lightly up the steps to the tomb and pointed into it and beckoned again. Doubtfully the Northerner approached, his eyes on her strained and unearthly face, beautiful as an efreet's. Slowly he mounted the steps.

Then he looked down.

Looked down to feel that the wholesome world was only a film on primary abominations. He realized that what Ahura was showing him had somehow been her ultimate degradation and the ultimate degradation of the thing that had named itself Anra Devadoris. He remembered the bizarre taunts that Ahura had thrown at the adept during the duel. He remembered her laughter, and his mind eddied along the edge of suspicions of pit-spawned improprieties and obscene intimacies. He hardly noticed that Ahura had slumped over the wall of the tomb, her white arms hanging down as if pointing all ten slender fingers in limp horror. He did not know that the blackly puzzled eyes of the suddenly awakened Mouser were peering up at him.

Thinking back, he realized that Devadoris' fastidiousness and exquisitely groomed appearance had made him think of the tomb as an eccentric entrance to some luxurious underground palace.

But now he saw that there were no doors in that cramping cell into which he peered, nor cracks indicating where hidden doors might be. Whatever had come from there, had lived there, where the dry corners were thick with webs and the floor swarmed with maggots, dung beetles, and furry black spiders.

6
The Mountain

Perhaps some chuckling demon, or Ningauble himself, planned it that way. At all events, as Fafhrd stepped down from the tomb, he got his feet tangled in the shroud of Ahriman and bellowed wildly (the Mouser called it "bleating") before he noticed the cause, which was by that time ripped to tatters.

Next Ahura, aroused by the tumult, set them into a brief panic by screaming that the black monolith and its soldiery were marching toward them to grind them under stony feet.

Almost immediately afterwards the cup of Socrates momentarily froze their blood by rolling around in a semicircle, as if its learned owner were invisibly pawing for it, perhaps to wet his throat after a spell of dusty disputation in the underworld. Of the withered sprig from the Tree of Life there was no sign, although the Mouser jumped as far and as skittishly as one of his namesakes when he saw a large black walking-stick insect crawling away from where the sprig might have fallen

But it was the camel that caused the biggest commotion, by suddenly beginning to prance about clumsily in a most uncharacteristically ecstatic fashion, finally cavorting up eagerly on two legs to the mare, which fled in squealing dismay. Afterwards it became apparent that the camel must have gotten into the aphrodisiacs, for one of the bottles was pashed as if by a hoof, with only a scummy licked patch showing where its leaked contents had been, and two of the small clay jars were vanished entirely. Fafhrd set out after the two beasts on one of the remaining horses, hallooing crazily.

The Mouser, left alone with Ahura, found his glibness put to the test in saving her sanity by a barrage of small talk, mostly well-spiced Tyrian gossip, but including a wholly apocryphal tale of how he and Fafhrd and five small Ethiopian boys once played Maypole with the eye-stalks of a drunken Ningauble, leaving him peering about in the oddest directions. (The Mouser was wondering why they had not heard from their seven-eyed mentor. After victories Ningauble was always particularly prompt in getting in his demands for payment; and very exacting too—he would insist on a strict accounting for the three missing aphrodisiac containers.)

The Mouser might have been expected to take advantage of this opportunity to press his suit with Ahura, and if possible asure himself that he was now wholly free of the snail-curse. But, her hysterical condition aside, he felt strangely shy with her, as if, although this was the Ahura he loved, he were now meeting her for the first time. Certainly this was a wholly different Ahura from the one with whom they had journeyed to the Lost City, and the memory of how he had treated that other Ahura put a restraint on him. So he cajoled and comforted her as he might have some lonely Tyrian waif, finally bringing two funny little

hand-puppets from his pouch and letting them amuse her for him.

And Ahura sobbed and stared and shivered, and hardly seemed to hear what nonsense the Mouser was saying, yet grew quiet and sane-eyed and appeared to be comforted.

When Fafhrd eventually returned with the still giddy camel and the outraged mare, he did not interrupt, but listened gravely, his gaze occasionally straying to the dead adept, the black monolith, the stone city, or the valley's downward slope to the north. High over their heads a flock of birds was flying in the same direction. Suddenly they scattered wildly, as if an eagle had dropped among them. Fafhrd frowned. A moment later he heard a whirring in the air. The Mouser and Ahura looked up too, momentarily glimpsed something slim hurtling downward. They cringed. There was a thud as a long whitish arrow buried itself in a crack in the pavement hardly a foot from Fafhrd and stuck there vibrating.

After a moment Fafhrd touched it with shaking hand. The shaft was crusted with ice, the feathers stiff, as if, incredibly, it had sped for a long time through frigid supramundane air. There was something tied snugly around the shaft. He detached and unrolled an ice-brittle sheet of papyrus, which softened under his touch, and read, "You must go farther. Your quest is not ended. Trust in omens. Ningauble."

Still trembling, Fafhrd began to curse thunderously. He crumpled the papyrus, jerked up the arrow, broke it in two, threw the parts blindly away. "Misbegotten spawn of a eunuch, an owl, and an octopus!" he finished. "First he tries to skewer us from the skies, then he tells us our quest is not ended when we've just ended it!"

The Mouser, well knowing these rages into which Fafhrd was apt to fall after battle, especially a battle in which he had not been able to participate, started to comment coolly. Then he saw the anger abruptly drain from Fafhrd's eyes, leaving a wild twinkle which he did not like.

"Mouser!" said Fafhrd eagerly. "Which way did I throw the arrow?"

"Why, north," said the Mouser without thinking.

"Yes, and the birds were flying north, and the arrow was coated with ice!" The wild twinkle in Fafhrd's eyes became a berserk brilliance. "Omens, he said? We'll trust in omens all right! We'll go north, north, and still north!"

The Mouser's heart sank. Now would be a particularly difficult time to combat Fafhrd's long-standing desire to take him to "that wondrously cold land where only brawny, hot-blooded men may live and they but by the killing of fierce, furry animals" —a prospect poignantly disheartening to a lover of hot baths, the sun, and southern nights.

"This is the chance of all chances," Fafhrd continued, intoning like a skald. "Ah, to rub one's naked hide with snow, to plunge like walrus into ice-garnished water. Around the Caspian and over greater mountains than these goes a way that men of my race have taken. Thor's gut, but you will love it! No wine, only hot mead and savory smoking carcasses, skin-toughening furs to wear, cold air at night to keep dreams clear and sharp, and great strong-hipped women. Then to raise sail on a winter ship and laugh at the frozen spray. Why have we so long delayed? Come! By the icy member that begot Odin, we must start at once!"

The Mouser stifled a groan. "Ah, blood brother," he intoned, not a whit less brazen-voiced, "my heart leaps even more than yours at the thought of nerve-quickening snow and all the other niceties of the manly life I have long yearned to taste. But—" Here his voice broke sadly, "—we forget this good woman, whom in any case, even if we disregard Ningauble's injunction, we must take safely back to Tyre."

He smiled inwardly.

"But I don't want to go back to Tyre," interrupted Ahura, looking up from the puppets with an impishness so like a child's that the Mouser cursed himself for ever having treated her as one. "This lonely spot seems equally far from all builded places. North is as good a way as any."

"Flesh of Freya!" bellowed Fafhrd, throwing his arms wide. "Do you hear what she says, Mouser? By Idun, that was spoken like a true snow-land woman! Not one moment must be wasted now. We shall smell mead before a year is out. By Frigg, a woman! Mouser, you good for one so small, did you not notice the pretty way she put it?"

So it was bustle about and pack and (for the present, at least, the Mouser conceded) no way out of it. The chest of aphrodisiacs, the cup, and the tattered shroud were bundled back onto the camel, which was still busy ogling the mare and smacking its great leathery lips. And Fafhrd leaped and shouted and clapped the Mouser's back as if there were not an eon-old

dead stone city around them and a lifeless adept warming in the sun.

In a matter of moments they were jogging off down the valley, with Fafhrd singing tales of snowstorms and hunting and monsters big as icebergs and giants as tall as frosty mountains. and the Mouser dourly amusing himself by picturing his own death at the hands of some overly affectionate "great strong-hipped" woman.

Soon the way became less barren. Scrub trees and the valley's downward trend hid the city behind them. A surge of relief which the Mouser hardly noticed went through him as the last stony sentinel dipped out of sight, particularly the black monolith left to brood over the adept. He turned his attention to what lay ahead a conical mountain barring the valley's mouth and wearing a high cap of mist, a lonely thunderhead which his imagination shaped into incredible towers and spires.

Suddenly his sleepy thoughts snapped awake. Fafhrd and Ahura had stopped and were staring at something wholly unexpected—a low wooden windowless house pressed back among the scrubby trees, with a couple of tilled fields behind it. The rudely carved guardian spirits at the four corners of the roof and topping the kingposts seemed Persian, but Persian purged of all southern influence ancient Persian.

And ancient Persian too appeared the thin features, straight nose, and black-streaked beard of the aged man watching them circumspectly from the low doorway. It seemed to be Ahura's face he scanned most intently—or tried to scan, since Fafhrd mostly hid her.

"Greetings, Father," called the Mouser. "Is this not a merry day for riding, and yours good lands to pass?"

"Yes," replied the aged man dubiously, using a rusty dialect. "Though there are none, or few, who pass."

"Just as well to be far from the evil stinking cities," Fafhrd interjected heartily. "Do you know the mountain ahead, Father? Is there an easy way past it that leads north?"

At the word "mountain" the aged man cringed. He did not answer.

"Is there something wrong about the path we are taking?" the Mouser asked quickly. "Or something evil about that misty mountain?"

The aged man started to shrug his shoulders, held them contracted, looked again at the travelers. Friendliness seemed to

fight with fear in his face, and to win, for he leaned forward and said hurriedly, "I warn you, sons, not to venture farther. What is the steel of your swords, the speed of your steeds, against — but remember" (he raised his voice) "I accuse no one." He looked quickly from side to side. "I have nothing at all to complain of. To me the mountain is a great benefit. My fathers returned here because the land is shunned by thief and honest man alike. There are no taxes on this land — no money taxes. I question nothing."

"Oh well, Father, I don't think we'll go farther," sighed the Mouser wilily. "We're but idle fellows who follow our noses across the world. And sometimes we smell a strange tale. And that reminds me of a matter in which you may be able to give us generous lads some help." He chinked the coins in his pouch. "We have heard a tale of a demon that inhabits here — a young demon dressed in black and silver, pale, with a black beard."

As the Mouser was saying these things the aged man was edging backward and at the finish he dodged inside and slammed the door, though not before they saw someone pluck at his sleeve. Instantly there came muffled angry expostulation in a girl's voice.

The door burst open. They heard the aged man say "... bring it down upon us all." Then a girl of about fifteen came running toward them. Her face was flushed, her eyes anxious and scared.

"You must turn back!" she called to them as she ran. "None but wicked things go to the mountain—or the doomed. And the mist hides a great horrible castle. And powerful, lonely demons live there. And one of them—"

She clutched at Fafhrd's stirrup. But just as her fingers were about to close on it, she looked beyond him straight at Ahura. An expression of abysmal terror came into her face. She screamed, "He! The black beard!" and crumpled to the ground.

The door slammed and they heard a bar drop into place.

They dismounted. Ahura quickly knelt by the girl, signed to them after a moment that she had only fainted. Fafhrd approached the barred door, but it would not open to any knocking, pleas, or threats. He finally solved the riddle by kicking it down. Inside he saw: the aged man cowering in a dark corner; a woman attempting to conceal a young child in a pile of straw; a very old woman sitting on a stool, obviously blind, but frightenedly peering about just the same; and a young man holding an axe in trembling hands. The family resemblance was very marked.

Fafhrd stepped out of the way of the young man's feeble axe-blow and gently took the weapon from him.

The Mouser and Ahura brought the girl inside. At sight of Ahura there were further horrified shrinkings.

They laid the girl on the straw, and Ahura fetched water and began to bathe her head.

Meanwhile, the Mouser, by playing on her family's terror and practically identifying himself as a mountain demon, got them to answer his questions. First he asked about the stone city. It was a place of ancient devil-worship, they said, a place to be shunned. Yes, they had seen the black monolith of Ahriman, but only from a distance. No, they did not worship Ahriman —see the fire-shrine they kept for his adversary Ormadz? But they dreaded Ahriman, and the stones of the devil-city had a life of their own.

Then he asked about the misty mountain, and found it harder to get satisfactory answers. The cloud always shrouded its peak, they insisted. Though once toward sunset, the young man admitted, he thought he had glimpsed crazily leaning green towers and twisted minarets. But there was danger up there, horrible danger. What danger? He could not say.

The Mouser turned to the aged man. "You told me," he said harshly, "that my brother demons exact no money tax from you for this land. What kind of tax, then, do they exact?"

"Lives," whispered the aged man, his eyes showing more white.

"Lives, eh? How many? And when do they come for them?"

"They never come. We go. Maybe every ten years, maybe every five, there comes a yellow-green light on the mountaintop at night, and a powerful calling in the air. Sometimes after such a night one of us is gone —one who was too far from the house when the green light came. To be in the house with others helps resist the calling. I never saw the light except from our door, with a fire burning bright at my back and someone holding me. My brother went when I was a boy. Then for many years afterwards the light never come, so that even I began to wonder whether it was not a boyhood legend or illusion.

"But seven years ago," he continued quaveringly, staring at the Mouser, "there came riding late one afternoon, on two gaunt and death-wearied horses, a young man and an old — or rather the semblances of a young man and an old, for I knew without being told, knew as I crouched trembling inside the door,

peering through the crack, that the masters were returning to the Castle Called Mist. The old man was bald as a vulture and had no beard. The young man had the beginnings of a silky black one. He was dressed in black and silver, and his face was very pale. His features were like—" Here his gaze flickered fearfully toward Ahura. "He rode stiffly, his lanky body rocking from side to side. He looked as if he were dead.

"They rode on toward the mountain without a sideward glance. But ever since that time the greenish-yellow light has glowed almost nightly from the mountaintop, and many of our animals have answered the call—and the wild ones too, to judge from their diminishing numbers. We have been careful, always staying near the house. It was not until three years ago that my eldest son went. He strayed too far in hunting and let darkness overtake him.

"And we have seen the black-bearded young man many times, usually at a distance, treading along the skyline or standing with head bowed upon some crag. Though once when my daughter was washing at the stream she looked up from her clothes-pounding and saw his dead eyes peering through the reeds. And once my eldest son, chasing a wounded snow-leopard into a thicket, found him talking with the beast. And once, rising early on a harvest morning, I saw him sitting by the well, staring at our doorway, although he did not seem to see me emerge. The old man we have seen too, though not so often. And for the last two years we have seen little or nothing of either, until " And once again his gaze flickered helplessly toward Ahura.

Meanwhile the girl had come to her senses. This time her terror of Ahura was not so extreme. She could add nothing to the aged man's tale.

They prepared to depart. The Mouser noted a certain veiled vindictiveness toward the girl, especially in the eyes of the woman with the child, for having tried to warn them. So turning in the doorway he said, "If you harm one hair of the girl's head, we will return, and the black-bearded one with us, and the green light to guide us by and wreak terrible vengeance."

He tossed a few gold coins on the floor and departed.

(And so, although or rather because her family looked upon her as an ally of demons, the girl from then on led a pampered life, and came to consider her blood as superior to theirs, and played shamelessly on their fear of the Mouser and Fafhrd and

Black-beard, and finally made them give her all the golden coins, and with them purchased seductive garments after fortunate passage to a faraway city, where by clever stratagem she became the wife of a satrap and lived sumptuously ever afterwards—something that is often the fate of romantic people, if only they are romantic enough.)

Emerging from the house, the Mouser found Fafhrd making a brave attempt to recapture his former berserk mood. "Hurry up, you little apprentice-demon!" he welcomed. "We've a tryst with the good land of snow and cannot lag on the way!"

As they rode off, the Mouser rejoined good-naturedly, "But what about the camel, Fafhrd? You can't very well take it to the ice country. It'll die of the phlegm."

"There's no reason why snow shouldn't be as good for camels as it is for men," Fafhrd retorted. Then, rising in his saddle and turning back, he waved toward the house and shouted, "Lad! You that held the axe! When in years to come your bones feel a strange yearning, turn your face to the north. There you will find a land where you can become a man indeed."

But in their hearts both knew that this talk was a pretense, that other planets now loomed in their horoscopes—in particular one that shone with a greenish-yellow light. As they pressed on up the valley, its silence and the absence of animal and insect life now made sinister, they felt mysteries hovering all around. Some, they knew, were locked in Ahura, but both refrained from questioning her, moved by vague apprehensions of terrifying upheavals her mind had undergone.

Finally the Mouser voiced what was in the thoughts of both of them. "Yes, I am much afraid that Anra Devadoris, who sought to make us his apprentices, was only an apprentice himself and apt, apprentice-wise, to take credit for his master's work. Black-beard is gone, but the beardless one remains. What was it Ningauble said?... no simple creature, but a mystery? ... no single identity, but a mirage?"

"Well, by all the fleas that bite the Great Antiochus, and all the lice that tickle his wife!" remarked a shrill, insolent voice behind them. "You doomed gentlemen already know what's in this letter I have for you."

They whirled around. Standing beside the camel—he might conceivably have been hidden, it is true, behind a nearby boulder—was a pertly grinning brown urchin, so typically Alexandrian that he might have stepped this minute out of

Rakotis with a skinny mongrel sniffing at his heels. (The Mouser half expected such a dog to appear at the next moment.)

"Who sent you, boy?" Fafhrd demanded. "How did you get here?"

"Now who and how would you expect?" replied the urchin. "Catch." He tossed the Mouser a wax tablet. "Say, you two, take my advice and get out while the getting's good. I think so far as your expedition's concerned, Ningauble's pulling up his tent pegs and scuttling home. Always a friend in need, my dear employer."

The Mouser ripped the cords, unfolded the tablet, and read:

"Greetings, my brave adventurers You have done well, but the best remains to be done. Hark to the calling. Follow the green light. But be very cautious afterwards. I wish I could be of more assistance. Send the shroud, the cup, and the chest back with the boy as first payment."

"Loki-brat! Regin-spawn!" burst out Fafhrd The Mouser looked up to see the urchin lurching and bobbing back toward the Lost City on the back of the eagerly fugitive camel. His impudent laughter returned shrill and faint.

"There," said the Mouser, "rides off the generosity of poor, penurious Ningauble. Now we know what to do with the camel."

"Zutt!" said Fafhrd. "Let him have the brute and the toys. Good riddance to his gossiping!"

"Not a very high mountain," said the Mouser an hour later, "but high enough. I wonder who carved this neat little path and who keeps it clear?"

As he spoke, he was winding loosely over his shoulder a long thin rope of the sort used by mountain climbers, ending in a hook.

It was sunset, with twilight creeping at their heels The little path, which had grown out of nothing, only gradually revealing itself, now led them sinuously around great boulders and along the crests of ever steeper rock-strewn slopes. Conversation, which was only a film on wariness, had played with the methods of Ningauble and his agents—whether they communicated with one another directly, from mind to mind, or by tiny whistles that emitted a note too high for human ears to hear, but capable of producing a tremor in any brother whistle or in the ear of the bat.

It was a moment when the whole universe seemed to pause. A spectral greenish light gleamed from the cloudy top ahead -but

that was surely only the sun's sky-reflected afterglow. There was a hint of all-pervading sound in the air, a mighty susurrus just below the threshold of hearing, as if an army of unseen insects were tuning up their instruments. These sensations were as intangible as the force that drew them onward, a force so feeble that they knew they could break it like a single spider-strand, yet did not choose to try.

As if in response to some unspoken word, both Fafhrd and the Mouser turned toward Ahura. Under their gaze she seemed to be changing momently, opening like a night flower, becoming ever more childlike, as if some master hypnotist were stripping away the outer, later petals of her mind, leaving only a small limpid pool, from whose unknown depths, however, dark bubbles were dimly rising.

They felt their infatuation pulse anew, but with a shy restraint on it. And their hearts fell silent as the hooded heights above, as she said, "Anra Devadoris was my twin brother."

7
Ahura Devadoris

"I never knew my father. He died before we were born. In one of her rare fits of communicativeness my mother told me, 'Your father was a Greek, Ahura. A very kind and learned man. He laughed a great deal.' I remember how stern she looked as she said that, rather than how beautiful, the sunlight glinting from her ringletted, black-dyed hair.

"But it seemed to me that she had slightly emphasized the word 'Your.' You see, even then I wondered about Anra. So I asked Old Berenice the housekeeper about it. She told me she had seen mother bear us, both on the same night.

"Old Berenice went on to tell me how my father had died. Almost nine months before we were born, he was found one morning beaten to death in the street just outside the door. A gang of Egyptian longshoremen who were raping and robbing by night were supposed to have done it, although they were never brought to justice—that was back when the Ptolemies had Tyre. It was a horrible death. He was almost pashed to a pulp against the cobbles.

"At another time Old Berenice told me something about my

mother, after making me swear by Athena and by Set and by Moloch, who would eat me if I did, never to tell. She said that mother came from a Persian family whose first daughters in the old times were all priestesses, dedicated from birth to be the wives of an evil Persian god, forbidden the embraces of mortals, doomed to spend their nights alone with the stone image of the god in a lonely temple 'half-way across the world,' she said. Mother was away that day and Old Berenice dragged me down into a little basement under Mother's bedroom and pointed out three ragged gray stones set among the bricks and told me they came from the temple. Old Berenice liked to frighten me, although she was deathly afraid of Mother.

"Of course I instantly went and told Anra, as I always did."

The little path was leading sharply upward now, along the spine of a crest Their horses went at a walk, first Fafhrd's, then Ahura's, last the Mouser's. The lines were smoothed in Fafhrd's face, although he was still very watchful, and the Mouser looked almost like a quaint child.

Ahura continued, "It is hard to make you understand my relationship with Anra, because it was so close that even the word 'relationship' spoils it. There was a game we would play in the garden. He would close his eyes and guess what I was looking at. In other games we would change sides, but never in this one.

"He invented all sorts of versions of the game and didn't want to play any others. Sometimes I would climb up by the olive tree onto the tiled roof Anra couldn't make it—and watch for an hour. Then I'd come down and tell him what I'd seen —some dyers spreading out wet green cloth for the sun to turn it purple, a procession of priests around the Temple of Melkarth, a galley from Pergamum setting sail, a Greek official impatiently explaining something to his Egyptian scribe, two henna-handed ladies giggling at some kilted sailors, a mysterious and lonely Jew—and he would tell me what kind of people they were and what they had been thinking and what they were planning to do. It was a very special kind of imagination, for afterwards when I began to go outside I found out that he was usually right. At the time I remember thinking that it was as if he were looking at the pictures in my mind and seeing more than I could. I liked it. It was such a gentle feeling.

"Of course our closeness was partly because mother, especially after she changed her way of life, wouldn't let us go out at all or mix with other children. There was more reason for

that than just her strictness. Anra was very delicate. He once broke his wrist and it was a long time healing. Mother had a slave come in who was skilled in such things, and he told mother he was afraid that Anra's bones were becoming too brittle. He told about children whose muscles and sinews gradually turned to stone, so that they became living statues. Mother struck him in the face and drove him from the house—an action that cost her a dear friend, because he was an important slave.

"And even if Anra had been allowed to go out, he couldn't have. Once after I had begun to go outside I persuaded him to come with me. He didn't want to, but I laughed at him, and he could never stand laughter. As soon as we climbed over the garden wall he fell down in a faint and I couldn't rouse him from it though I tried and tried. Finally I climbed back so I could open the door and drag him in, and Old Berenice spotted me and I had to tell her what had happened. She helped me carry him in, but afterwards she whipped me because she knew I'd never dare tell mother I'd taken him outside. Anra came to his senses while she was whipping me, but he was sick for a week afterwards. I don't think I ever laughed at him after that, until today.

"Cooped up in the house, Anra spent most of time studying. While I watched from the roof or wheedled stories from Old Berenice and the other slaves, or later on went out to gather information for him, he would stay in father's library, reading, or learning some new language from father's grammars and translations. Mother taught both of us to read Greek, and I picked up a speaking knowledge of Aramaic and scraps of other tongues from the slaves and passed them on to him. But Anra was far cleverer than I at reading. He loved letters as passionately as I did the outside. For him, they were alive. I remember him showing me some Egyptian hieroglyphs and telling me that they were all animals and insects. And then he showed me some Egyptian hieratics and demotics and told me those were the same animals in disguise. But Hebrew, he said, was best of all, for each letter was a magic charm. That was before he learned Old Persian Sometimes it was years before we found out how to pronounce the languages he learned. That was one of my most important jobs when I started to go outside for him.

"Father's library had been kept just as it was when he died. Neatly stacked in canisters were all the renowned philosophers, historians, poets, rhetoricians, and grammarians But tossed in a

corner along with potsherds and papyrus scraps like so much trash, were rolls of a very different sort. Across the back of one of them my father had scribbled, derisively I'm sure, in his big impulsive hand, 'Secret Wisdom!' It was those that from the first captured Anra's curiosity. He would read the respectable books in the canisters, but chiefly so he could go back and take a brittle roll from the corner, blow off the dust, and puzzle out a little more.

"They were very strange books that frightened and disgusted me and made me want to giggle all at once Many of them were written in a cheap and ignorant style Some of them told what dreams meant and gave directions for working magic --all sorts of nasty things to be cooked together. Others—Jewish rolls in Aramaic were about the end of the world and wild adventures of evil spirits and mixed-up, messy monsters things with ten heads and jeweled cartwheels for feet, things like that. Then there were Chaldean star-books that told how all the lights in the sky were alive and their names and what they did to you. And one jerky, half illiterate roll in Greek told about something horrible, which for a long while I couldn't understand, connected with an ear of corn and six pomegranate seeds. It was in another of those sensational Greek rolls that Anra first found out about Ahriman and his eternal empire of evil, and after that he couldn't wait until he'd mastered Old Persian. But none of the few Old Persian rolls in father's library were about Ahriman, so he had to wait until I could steal such things for him outside.

"My going outside was after mother changed her way of life. That happened when I was seven. She was always a very moody and frightening woman, though sometimes she'd be very affectionate toward me for a little while, and she always spoiled and pampered Anra, though from a distance, through the slaves, almost as if she were afraid of him.

"Now her moods became blacker and blacker Sometimes I'd surprise her looking in horror at nothing, or beating her forehead while her eyes were closed and her beautiful face was all taut, as if she were going mad. I had the feeling she'd been backed up to the end of some underground tunnel and must find a door leading out, or lose her mind.

"Then one afternoon I peeked into her bedroom and saw her looking into her silver mirror. For a long, long while she studied her face in it and I watched her without making a sound. I knew that something important was happening. Finally she seemed to

make some sort of difficult inward effort and the lines of anxiety and sternness and fear disappeared from her face, leaving it smooth and beautiful as a mask. Then she unlocked a drawer I'd never seen into before and took out all sorts of little pots and vials and brushes. With these she colored and whitened her face and carefully smeared a dark, shining powder around her eyes and painted her lips reddish-orange. All this time my heart was pounding and my throat was choking up. I didn't know why. Then she laid down her brushes and dropped her chiton and felt of her throat and breasts in a thoughtful way and took up the mirror and looked at herself with a cold satisfaction. She was very beautiful, but it was a beauty that terrified me. Until now I'd always thought of her as hard and stern outside, but soft and loving within, if only you could manage to creep into that core. But now she was all turned inside out. Strangling my sobs, I ran to tell Anra and find out what it meant. But this time his cleverness failed him. He was as puzzled and disturbed as I.

"It was right afterwards that she became even stricter with me, and although she continued to spoil Anra from a distance, kept us shut up from the world more than ever. I wasn't even allowed to speak to the new slave she'd bought, an ugly, smirking, skinny-legged girl named Phryne who used to massage her and sometimes play the flute. There were all sorts of visitors coming to the house now at night, but Anra and I were always locked in our little bedroom high up by the garden. We'd hear them yelling through the wall and sometimes screaming and bumping around the inner court to the sound of Phryne's flute. Sometimes I'd lie staring at the darkness in an inexplicable sick terror all night long. I tried every way to get Old Berenice to tell me what was happening, but for once her fear of mother's anger was too great. She'd only leer at me.

"Finally Anra worked out a plan for finding out. When he first told me about it, I refused. It terrified me. That was when I discovered the power he had over me. Up until that time the things I had done for him had been part of a game I enjoyed as much as he. I had never thought of myself as a slave obeying commands. But now when I rebelled, I found out not only that my twin had an obscure power over my limbs, so that I could hardly move them at all, or imagined I couldn't, if he were unwilling, but also that I couldn't bear the thought of him being unhappy or frustrated.

"I realize now that he had reached the first of those crises in

his life when his way was blocked and he pitilessly sacrificed his dearest helper to the urgings of his insatiable curiosity.

"Night came. As soon as we were locked in I let a knotted cord out the little high window and wriggled out and climbed down. Then I climbed the olive tree to the roof I crept over the tiles down to the square skylight of the inner court and managed to squirm over the edge—I almost fell—into a narrow, cobwebby space between the ceiling and the tiles. There was a faint murmur of talk from the dining room, but the court was empty. I lay still as a mouse and waited."

Fafhrd uttered a smothered exclamation and stopped his horse. The others did the same. A pebble rattled down the slope, but they hardly heard it. Seeming to come from the heights above them and yet to fill the whole darkening sky was something that was not entirely a sound, something that tugged at them like the Sirens' voices at fettered Odysseus. For a while they listened incredulously, then Fafhrd shrugged and started forward again, the others following.

Ahura continued, "For a long time nothing happened, except occasionally slaves hurried in and out with full and empty dishes, and there was some laughter, and I heard Phryne's flute. Then suddenly the laughter grew louder and changed to singing, and there was the sound of couches pushed back and the patter of footsteps, and there swept into the court a Dionysiac rout.

"Phryne, naked, piped the way. My mother followed, laughing, her arms linked with those of two dancing young men, but clutching to her bosom a large silver wine-bowl. The wine sloshed over and stained purple her white silk chiton around her breasts, but she only laughed and reeled more wildly. After those came many others, men and women, young and old, all singing and dancing. One limber young man skipped high, clapping his heels, and one fat old grinning fellow panted and had to be pulled by girls, but they kept it up three times around the court before they threw themselves down on the couches and cushions. Then while they chattered and laughed and kissed and embraced and played pranks and watched a naked girl prettier than Phryne dance, my mother offered the bowl around for them to dip their wine cups.

"I was astounded—and entranced. I had been almost dead with fear, expecting I don't know what cruelties and horrors. Instead, what I saw was wholly lovely and natural. The revelation burst on me, 'So this is the wonderful and important

thing that people do.' My mother no longer frightened me. Though she still wore her new face, there was no longer any hardness about her, inside or out, only joy and beauty. The young men were so witty and gay I had to put my fist in my mouth to keep from screaming with laughter. Even Phryne, squatting on her heels like a skinny boy as she piped, seemed for once unmalicious and likable. I couldn't wait to tell Anra.

"There was only one disturbing note, and that was so slight I hardly noticed it. Two of the men who took the lead in the joking, a young red-haired fellow and an older chap with a face like a lean satyr, seemed to have something up their sleeves. I saw them whisper to some of the others. And once the younger grinned at mother and shouted, 'I know something about you from way back!' And once the older called at her mockingly, 'I know something about your great-grandmother, you old Persian you!' Each time mother laughed and waved her hand derisively, but I could see that she was bothered underneath. And each time some of the others paused momentarily, as if they had an inkling of something, but didn't want to let on. Eventually the two men drifted out, and from then on there was nothing to mar the fun.

"The dancing became wilder and staggering, the laughter louder, more wine was spilt than drank. Then Phryne threw away her flute and ran and landed in the fat man's lap with a jounce that almost knocked the wind out of him. Four or five of the others tumbled down.

"Just at that moment there came a crashing and a loud rending of wood, as if a door were being broken in. Instantly everyone was as still as death. Someone jerked around and a lamp snuffed out, throwing half the court into shadow.

"Then loud, shaking footsteps, like two paving blocks walking, sounded through the house, coming nearer and nearer.

"Everyone was frozen, staring at the doorway. Phryne still had her arm around the fat man's neck. But it was in mother's face that the truly unbearable terror showed. She had retreated to the remaining lamp and dropped to her knees there. The whites showed around her eyes. She began to utter short, rapid screams, like a trapped dog.

"Then through the doorway clomped a great ragged-edged, square-limbed, naked stone man fully seven feet high. His face was just expressionless black gashes in a flat surface, and before him was thrust a mortary stone member. I couldn't bear to look

at him, but I had to. He tramped echoingly across the room to mother, jerked her up, still screaming, by the hair, and with the other hand ripped down her wine-stained chiton. I fainted.

"But it must have ended about there, for when I came to, sick with terror, it was to hear everyone laughing uproariously. Several of them were bending over mother, at once reassuring and mocking her, the two men who had gone out among them, and to one side was a jumbled heap of cloth and thin boards, both crusted with mortar. From what they said I understood that the red-haired one had worn the horrible disguise, while satyr-face had made the footsteps by rhythmically clomping on the floor with a brick, and had simulated the breaking door by jumping on a propped-up board.

"'Now tell us your great-grandmother wasn't married to a stupid old stone demon back in Persia!' he jeered pleasantly, wagging his finger.

"Then came something that tortured me like a rusty dagger and terrified me, in a very quiet way, as much as the image. Although she was white as milk and barely able to totter, mother did her best to pretend that the loathsome trick they'd played on her was just a clever joke. I knew why. She was horribly afraid of losing their friendship and would have done anything rather than be left alone.

"Her pretence worked. Although some of them left, the rest yielded to her laughing entreaties. They drank until they sprawled out snoring. I waited until almost dawn, then summoned all my courage, made my stiff muscles pull me up onto the tiles, cold and slippery with dew, and with what seemed the last of my strength, dragged myself back to our room.

"But not to sleep. Anra was awake and avid to hear what had happened. I begged him not to make me, but he insisted. I had to tell him everything. The pictures of what I'd seen kept bobbing up in my wretchedly tired mind so vividly that it seemed to be happening all over again. He asked all sorts of questions, wouldn't let me miss a single detail. I had to relive that first thrilling revelation of joy, tainted now by the knowledge that the people were mostly sly and cruel.

"When I got to the part about the stone image, Anra became terribly excited. But when I told him about it all being a nasty joke, he seemed disappointed. He became angry, as if he suspected me of lying.

"Finally he let me sleep.

"The next night I went back to my cubbyhole under the tiles."

Again Fafhrd stopped his horse. The mist masking the mountaintop had suddenly begun to glow, as if a green moon were rising, or as if it were a volcano spouting green flames. The hue tinged their upturned faces. It lured like some vast cloudy jewel. Fafhrd and the Mouser exchanged a glance of fatalistic wonder. Then all three proceeded up the narrowing ridge.

Ahura continued, "I'd sworn by all the gods I'd never do it. I'd told myself I'd rather die. But .. Anra made me.

"Daytimes I wandered around like a stupefied little ghost-slave. Old Berenice was puzzled and suspicious and once or twice I thought Phryne grimaced knowingly. Finally even mother noticed and questioned me and had a physician in.

"I think I would have gotten really sick and died, or gone mad, except that then, in desperation at first, I started to go outside, and a whole new world opened to me."

As she spoke on, her voice rising in hushed excitement at the memory of it, there was painted in the minds of Fafhrd and the Mouser a picture of the magic city that Tyre must have seemed to the child—the waterfront, the riches, the bustle of trade, the hum of gossip and laughter, the ships and strangers from foreign lands.

"Those people I had watched from the roof I could touch them now, follow them around corners, make friends with them—and I soon found that I could make friends almost anywhere. Every person I met seemed a wonderful mystery, something to be smiled and chattered at. I dressed as a slave-child, and all sorts of folk got to know me and expect my coming –other slaves, tavern wenches and sellers of sweetmeats, street merchants and scribes, errand boys and boatmen, seamstresses and cooks. I made myself useful, ran errands myself, listened delightedly to their endless talk, passed on gossip I'd heard, gave away bits of food I'd stolen at home, became a favorite. It seemed to me I could never get enough of Tyre. I scampered from morning to night. It was generally twilight before I climbed back over the garden wall.

"I couldn't fool Old Berenice, but after a while I found a way to escape her whippings. I threatened to tell mother it was she who had told red-hair and satyr-face about the stone image. I don't know if I guessed right or not, but the threat worked. After that, she would only mumble venomously whenever I sneaked in after sunset. As for mother, she was getting farther away from us

all the time, alive only by night, lost by day in frightened brooding.

"Then, each evening, came another delight. I would tell Anra everything I had heard and seen, each new adventure, each little triumph. Like a magpie I brought home for him all the bright colors, sounds, and odors. Like a magpie I repeated for him the babble of strange languages I'd heard, the scraps of learned talk I'd caught from priests and scholars I forgot what he'd done to me. We were playing the game again, the most wonderful version of all. Often he helped me, suggesting new places to go, new things to watch for, and once he even saved me from being kidnapped by a couple of ingratiating Alexandrian slave-dealers whom anyone but I would have suspected.

"It was odd how that happened. The two had made much of me, were promising me sweetmeats if I would go somewhere nearby with them, when I thought I heard Anra's voice whisper 'Don't.' I became cold with terror and darted down an alley.

"It seemed as though Anra were now able sometimes to see the pictures in my mind even when I was away from him. I felt ever so close to him.

"I was wild for him to come out with me, but I've told you what happened the one time he tried. And as the years passed, he seemed to become tied even tighter to the house. Once when mother vaguely talked of moving to Antioch, he fell ill and did not recover until she had promised we would never, never go.

"Meanwhile he was growing up into a slim and darkly handsome youth. Phryne began to make eyes at him and sought excuses to go to his room. But he was frightened and rebuffed her. However, he coaxed me to make friends with her, although mother had forbidden it, to go to her room, talk to her, be near her, even share her bed those nights when mother did not want her. He seemed to like that.

"You know the restlessness that comes to a maturing child, when he seeks love, or adventure, or the gods, or all three. That restlessness had come to Anra, but his only gods were in those dusty, dubious rolls my father had labeled 'Secret Wisdom!' I hardly knew what he did by day any more except that there were odd ceremonies and experiments mixed with his studies. Some of them he conducted in the little basement where the three gray stones were. At such times he had me keep watch. He no longer told me what he was reading or thinking, and I was so busy in my new world that I hardly noticed the difference.

"And yet I could see the restlessness growing. He sent me on longer and more difficult missions, had me inquire after books the scribes had never heard of, seek out all manner of astrologers and wise-women, required me to steal or buy stranger and stranger ingredients from the herb doctors. And when I did win such treasures for him, he would only snatch them from me unjoyfully and be twice as gloomy the evening after Gone were such days of rejoicing as when I had brought him the first Persian rolls about Ahriman, the first lodestone, or repeated every syllable I had overheard of the words of a famous philosopher from Athens. He was beyond all that now. He sometimes hardly listened to my detailed reports, as if he had already glanced through them and knew they contained nothing to interest him.

"He grew haggard and sick. His restlessness took the form of a frantic pacing. I was reminded of my mother trapped in that blocked-off, underground corridor. It made my heart hurt to watch him. I longed to help him, to share with him my new exciting life, to give him the thing he so desperately wanted.

"But it was not my help he needed. He had embarked on a dark, mysterious quest I did not understand, and he had reached a bitter, corroding impasse where of his own experience he could go no farther.

"He needed a teacher."

The Old Man Without a Beard

"I was fifteen when I met the Old Man Without a Beard. I called him that then and I still call him that, for there is no other distinguishing characteristic my mind can seize and hold. Whenever I think of him, even whenever I look at him, his face melts into the mob. It is as if a master actor, after portraying every sort of character in the world, should have hit on the simplest and most perfect of disguises.

"As to what lies behind that too-ordinary face—the something you can sometimes sense but hardly grasp – all I can say is a satiety and an emptiness that are not of this world."

Fafhrd caught his breath. They had reached the end of the ridge. The leftward slope had suddenly tilted uward, become the

core of the mountain. While the rightward slope had swung downward and out of sight, leaving an unfathomable black abyss. Between, the path continued upward, a stony strip only a few feet wide. The Mouser touched reassuringly the coil of rope over his shoulder For a moment their horses hung back. Then, as if the faint green glow and the ceaseless murmuring that bathed them were an intangible net, they were drawn on

"I was in a wine shop. I had just carried a message to one of the men-friends of the Greek girl Chloe, hardly older than myself, when I noticed him sitting in a corner I asked Chloe about him. She said he was a Greek chorister and commercial poet down on his luck, or, no, that he was an Egyptian fortuneteller, changed her mind again, tried to remember what a Samian pander had told her about him, gave him a quick puzzled look, decided that she didn't really know him at all and that it didn't matter.

"But his very emptiness intrigued me. Here was a new kind of mystery. After I had been watching him for some time, he turned around and looked at me. I had the impression that he had been aware of my inquiring gaze from the beginning, but had ignored it as a sleepy man a buzzing fly.

"After that one glance he slumped back into his former position, but when I left the shop he walked at my side.

"'You're not the only one who looks through your eyes, are you?' he said quietly.

"I was so startled by his question that I didn't know how to reply, but he didn't require me to. His face brightened without becoming any more individualized and he immediately began to talk to me in the most charming and humorous way, though his words gave no clue as to who he was or what he did

"However, I gathered from hints he let fall that he possessed some knowledge of those odd sorts of things that always interested Anra and so I followed him willingly my hand in his.

"But not for long. Our way led up a narrow twisting alley, and I saw a sideways glint in his eye, and felt his hand tighten on mine in a way I did not like. I became somewhat frightened and expected at any minute the danger warning from Anra.

"We passed a lowering tenement and stopped at a rickety three-story shack leaning against it. He said his dwelling was at the top. He was drawing me toward the ladder that served for stairs, and still the danger warning did not come.

"Then his hand crept toward my wrist and I did not wait any

longer, but jerked away and ran, my fear growing greater with every step.

"When I reached home, Anra was pacing like a leopard. I was eager to tell him all about my narrow escape, but he kept interrupting me to demand details of the Old Man and angrily flirting his head because I could tell him so little. Then, when I came to the part about my running away, an astounding look of tortured betrayal contorted his features, he raised his hands as if to strike me, then threw himself down on the couch, sobbing.

"But as I leaned over him anxiously, his sobs stopped. He looked around at me, over his shoulder, his face white but composed, and said, 'Ahura, I must know everything about him.'

"In that one moment I realized all that I had overlooked for years--that my delightful airy freedom was a sham that it was not Anra, but I, that was tethered—that the game was not a game, but a bondage—that while I had gone about so open and eager, intent only on sound and color, form and movement, he had been developing the side I had no time for, the intellect, the purpose, the will—that I was only a tool to him, a slave to be sent on errands, an unfeeling extension of his own body, a tentacle he could lose and grow again, like an octopus—that even my misery at his frantic disappointment, my willingness to do anything to please him, was only another lever to be coldly used against me that our very closeness, so that we were only two halves of one mind, was to him only another tactical advantage

"He had reached the second great crisis of his life, and again he unhesitatingly sacrificed his nearest.

"There was something uglier to it even than that, as I could see in his eyes as soon as he was sure he had me. We were like brother and sister kings in Alexandria or Antioch, playmates from infancy, destined for each other, but unknowingly, and the boy crippled and impotent—and now, too soon and horridly had come the bridal night.

"The end was that I went back to the narrow alley, the lowering tenement, the rickety shack, the ladder, the third story, and the Old Man Without a Beard.

"I didn't give in without a struggle. Once I was out of the house I fought every inch of the way. Up until now, even in the cubbyhole under the tiles, I had only to spy and observe for Anra. I had not to do things.

"But in the end it was the same. I dragged myself up the last

rung and knocked on the warped door. It swung open at my touch. Inside, across a fumy room, behind a large empty table, by the light of a single ill-burning lamp, his eyes as unwinking as a fish's, and upon me, sat the Old Man Without a Beard."

Ahura paused, and Fafhrd and the Mouser felt a clamminess descend upon their skins. Looking up, they saw uncoiling downward from dizzy heights, like the ghosts of constrictive snakes or jungle vines, thin tendrils of green mist.

"Yes," said Ahura, "there is always mist or smokiness of some sort where he is.

"Three days later I returned to Anra and told him everything—a corpse giving testimony as to its murderer. But in this instance the judge relished the testimony, and when I told him of a certain plan the Old Man had in mind, an unearthly joy shimmered on his face.

"The Old Man was to be hired as a tutor and physician for Anra. This was easily arranged, as mother always acceded to Anra's wishes and perhaps still had some hope of seeing him stirred from his seclusion. Moreover, the Old Man had a mixture of unobtrusiveness and power that I am sure would have won him entry everywhere. Within a matter of weeks he had quietly established a mastery over everyone in the house—some, like mother, merely to be ignored; others, like Phryne, ultimately to be used.

"I will always remember Anra on the day the Old Man came. This was to be his first contact with the reality beyond the garden wall, and I could see that he was terribly frightened. As the hours of waiting passed, he retreated to his room, and I think it was mainly pride that kept him from calling the whole thing off. We did not hear the Old Man coming—only Old Berenice, who was counting the silver outside, stopped her muttering. Anra threw himself back on the couch in the farthest corner of the room, his hands gripping its edge, his eyes fixed on the doorway. A shadow lurched into sight there, grew darker and more definite. Then the Old Man put down on the threshold the two bags he was carrying and looked beyond me at Anra. A moment later my twin's painful gasps died in a faint hiss of expired breath. He had fainted.

"That evening his new education began. Everything that had happened was, as it were, repeated on a deeper, stranger level. There were languages to be learned, but not any languages to be found in human books; rituals to be intoned, but not to any gods

that ordinary men have worshipped: magic to be brewed, but not with herbs that I could buy or steal. Daily Anra was instructed in the ways of inner darkness, the sicknesses and unknown powers of the mind, the eon-buried emotions that must be due to insidious impurities the gods overlooked in the earth from which they made man. By silent stages our home became a temple of the abominable, a monastery of the unclean.

"Yet there was nothing of tainted orgy, of vicious excess about their actions. Whatever they did, was done with strict self-discipline and mystic concentration. There was no looseness anywhere about them. They aimed at a knowledge and a power, born of darkness, true, but one which they were willing to make any self-sacrifice to obtain. They were religious, with this difference: their ritual was degradation, their aim a world chaos played upon like a broken lyre by their master minds, their god the quintessence of evil, Ahriman, the ultimate pit.

"As if performed by sleepwalkers, the ordinary routine of our home went on. Indeed, I sometimes felt that we were all of us, except Anra, merely dreams behind the Old Man's empty eyes — actors in a deliberate nightmare where men portrayed beasts; beasts, worms; worms, slime.

"Each morning I went out and made my customary way through Tyre, chattering and laughing as before, but emptily, knowing that I was no more free than if visible chains leashed me to the house, a puppet dangled over the garden wall. Only at the periphery of my masters' intentions did I dare oppose them even passively -once I smuggled the girl Chloe a protective amulet because I fancied they were considering her as a subject for such experiments as they had tried on Phryne. And daily the periphery of their intentions widened—indeed, they would long since have left the house themselves, except for Anra's bondage to it.

"It was to the problem of breaking that bondage that they now devoted themselves. I was not told how they hoped to manage it, but I soon realized that I was to play a part.

"They would shine glittering lights into my eyes and Anra would chant until I slept. Hours or even days later I would awake to find that I had gone unconsciously about my daily business, my body a slave to Anra's commands. At other times Anra would wear a thin leather mask which covered all his features, so that he could only see, if at all, through my eyes. My sense of oneness with my twin grew steadily with my fear of him.

"Then came a period in which I was kept closely pent up, as if in some savage prelude to maturity or death or birth, or all three. The Old Man said something about 'not to see the sun or touch the earth.' Again I crouched for hours in the cubbyhole under the tiles or on reed mats in the little basement. And now it was my eyes and ears that were covered rather than Anra's. For hours I, whom sights and sounds had nourished more than food, could see nothing but fragmentary memories of the child-Anra sick, or the Old Man across the fumy room, or Phryne writhing on her belly and hissing like a snake. But worst of all was my separation from Anra. For the first time since our birth I could not see his face, hear his voice, feel his mind. I withered like a tree from which the sap is withdrawn, an animal in which the nerves have been killed.

"Finally came a day or night, I know not which, when the Old Man loosened the mask from my face. There could hardly have been more than a glimmer of light, but my long-blindfolded eyes made out every detail of the little basement with a painful clarity. The three gray stones had been dug out of the pavement. Supine beside them lay Anra, emaciated, pale, hardly breathing, looking as though he were about to die."

The three climbers stopped, confronted by a ghostly green wall. The narrow path had emerged onto what must be the mountain's tablelike top. Ahead stretched a level expanse of dark rock, mist-masked after the first few yards. Without a word they dismounted and led their trembling horses forward into a moist realm which, save that the water was weightless, most resembled a faintly phosphorescent sea-bottom.

"My heart leaped out toward my twin in pity and horror. I realized that despite all tyranny and torment I still loved him more than anything in the world, loved him as a slave loves the weak, cruel master who depends for everything on that slave, loved him as the ill-used body loves the despot mind. And I felt more closely linked to him, our lives and deaths interdependent, than if we had been linked by bonds of flesh and blood, as some rare twins are.

"The Old Man told me I could save him from death if I chose For the present I must merely talk to him in my usual fashion This I did, with an eagerness born of days without him. Save for an occasional faint fluttering of his sallow eyelids, Anra did not move, yet I felt that never before had he listened as intently, never before had he understood me as well. It seemed to me that

all my previous speech with him had been crude by contrast. Now I remembered and told him all sorts of things that had escaped my memory or seemed too subtle for language. I talked on and on, haphazardly, chaotically, ranging swiftly from local gossip to world history, delving into myriad experiences and feelings, not all of them my own.

"Hours, perhaps days passed the Old Man may have put some spell of slumber or deafness on the other inmates of the house to guard against interruption. At times my throat grew dry and he gave me drink, but I hardly dared pause for that, since I was appalled at the slight but unremitting change for the worse that was taking place in my twin and I had become possessed with the idea that my talking was the cord between life and Anra, that it created a channel between our bodies, across which my strength could flow to revive him.

"My eyes swam and blurred, my body shook, my voice ran the gamut of hoarseness down to an almost inaudible whisper. Despite my resolve I would have fainted, save that the Old Man held to my face burning aromatic herbs which caused me to come shudderingly awake.

"Finally I could no longer speak, but that was no release, as I continued to twitch my cracked lips and think on and on in a rushing feverish stream. It was as if I jerked and flung from the depths of my mind scraps of ideas from which Anra sucked the tiny life that remained to him.

"There was one persistent image—of a dying Hermaphroditus approaching Salmacis' pool, in which he would become one with the nymph.

"Farther and farther I ventured out along the talk-created channel between us, nearer and nearer I came to Anra's pale, delicate, cadaverous face, until, as with a despairing burst of effort I hurled my last strength to him, it loomed large as a green-shadowed ivory cliff falling to engulf me "

Ahura's words broke off in a gasp of horror. All three stood still and stared ahead For rearing up before them in the thickening mist, so near that they felt they had been ambushed, was a great chaotic structure of whitish, faintly yellowed stone, through whose narrow windows and wide-open door streamed a baleful greenish light, source of the mist's phosphorescent glow. Fafhrd and the Mouser thought of Karnak and its obelisks, of the Pharos lighthouse, of the Acropolis, of the Ishtar Gate in Babylon, of the ruins of Khatti, of the Lost City of Ahriman, of

those doomful mirage-towers that seamen see where are Scylla and Charybdis. Of a truth, the architecture of the strange structure varied so swiftly and to such unearthly extremes that it was lifted into an insane stylistic realm all its own. Mist-magnified, its twisted ramps and pinnacles, like a fluid face in a nightmare, pushed upward toward where the stars should have been.

9
The Castle Called Mist

"What happened next was so strange that I felt sure I had plunged from feverish consciousness into the cool retreat of a fanciful dream," Ahura continued as, having tethered their horses, they mounted a wide stairway toward that open door which mocked alike sudden rush and cautious reconnoitering. Her story went on with as calm and drugged a fatalism as their step-by-step advance. "I was lying on my back beside the three stones and watching my body move around the little basement. I was terribly weak, I could not stir a muscle, and yet I felt delightfully refreshed all the dry burning and aching in my throat was gone. Idly, as one will in a dream, I studied my face. It seemed to be smiling in triumph, very foolishly I thought. But as I continued to study it, fear began to intrude into my pleasant dream. The face was mine, but there were unfamiliar quirks of expression. Then, becoming aware of my gaze, it grimaced contemptuously and turned and said something to the Old Man, who nodded matter-of-factly. The intruding fear engulfed me. With a tremendous effort I managed to roll my eyes downward and look at my real body, the one lying on the floor.

"It was Anra's."

They entered the doorway and found themselves in a huge, many-nooked and niched stone room—though seemingly no nearer the ultimate source of the green glow, except that here the misty air was bright with it. There were stone tables and benches and chairs scattered about, but the chief feature of the place was the mighty archway ahead, from which stone groinings curved upward in baffling profusion. Fafhrd's and the Mouser's eyes momentarily sought the keystone of the arch, both because of its great size and because there was an odd dark recess toward its top.

The silence was portentous, making them feel uneasily for their swords. It was not merely that the luring music had ceased—here in the Castle Called Mist there was literally no sound, save what rippled out futilely from their own beating hearts. There was instead a fogbound concentration that froze into the senses, as though they were inside the mind of a titanic thinker, or as if the stones themselves were entranced.

Then, since it seemed as unthinkable to wait in that silence as for lost hunters to stand motionless in deep winter cold, they passed under the archway and took at random an upward-leading ramp.

Ahura continued, "Helplessly I watched them make certain preparations. While Anra gathered some small bundles of manuscripts and clothing, the Old Man lashed together the three mortar-crusted stones.

"It may have been that in the moment of victory he relaxed habitual precautions. At all events, while he was still bending over the stones, my mother entered the room. Crying out, 'What have you done to him?' she threw herself down beside me and felt at me anxiously. But that was not to the Old Man's liking. He grabbed her by shoulders and roughly jerked her back. She lay huddled against the wall, her eyes wide, her teeth chattering – especially when she saw Anra, in my body, grotesquely lift the lashed stones. Meanwhile the Old Man hoisted me, in my new, wasted form, to his shoulder, picked up the bundles, and ascended the short stair.

"We walked through the inner court, rose-strewn and filled with mother's perfumed, wine-splashed friends, who stared at us in befuddled astonishment, and so out of the house. It was night. Five slaves waited with a curtained litter in which the Old Man placed me. My last glimpse was of Mother's face, its paint tracked by tears, peering horrifiedly through the half open door."

The ramp issued onto an upper level and they found themselves wandering aimlessly through a mazy series of rooms. Of little use to record here the things they thought they saw through shadowy doorways, or thought they heard through metal doors with massy complex bolts whose drawing they dared not fathom. There was a disordered, high-shelved library, certain of the rolls seeming to smoke and fume as though they held in their papyrus and ink the seeds of a holocaust; the corners were piled with sealed canisters of greenish stone and age-verdigrised brass tablets. There were instruments that

Fafhrd did not even bother to warn the Mouser against touching. Another room exuded a fearful animal stench; upon its slippery floor they noted a sprinkling of short, incredibly thick black bristles. But the only living creature they saw at any time was a little hairless thing that looked as if it had once sought to become a bear cub; when Fafhrd stooped to pet it, it flopped away whimpering. There was a door that was thrice as broad as it was high, and its height hardly that of a man's knee. There was a window that let upon a blackness that was neither of mist nor of night, and yet seemed infinite; peering in, Fafhrd could faintly see rusted iron handholds leading upward. The Mouser uncoiled his climbing rope to its full length and swung it around inside the window, without the hook striking anything.

Yet the strangest impression this ominously empty stronghold begot in them was also the subtlest, and one which each new room or twisting corridor heightened a feeling of architectural inadequacy. It seemed impossible that the supports were equal to the vast weights of the great stone floors and ceilings, so impossible that they almost became convinced that there were buttresses and retaining walls they could not see, either invisible or existing in some other world altogether, as if the Castle Called Mist had only partially emerged from some unthinkable outside. That certain bolted doors seemed to lead where no space could be, added to this hinting.

They wandered through passages so distorted that, though they retained a precise memory of landmarks, they lost all sense of direction.

Finally Fafhrd said, "This gets us nowhere. Whatever we seek, whomever we wait for—Old Man or demon—it might as well be in that first room of the great archway."

The Mouser nodded as they turned back, and Ahura said, "At least we'll be at no greater disadvantage there. Ishtar, but the Old Man's rhyme is true! 'Each chamber is a slavering maw, each arch a toothy jaw.' I always greatly feared this place, but never thought to find a mazy den that sure as death has stony mind and stony claws.

"They never chose to bring me here, you see, and from the night I left our home in Anra's body, I was a living corpse, to be left or taken where they wished. They would have killed me, I think, at least there came a time when Anra would, except it was necessary that Anra's body have an occupant—or my rightful body when he was out of it, for Anra was able to re-enter his own

body and walk about in it in this region of Ahriman. At such times I was kept drugged and helpless at the Lost City I believe that something was done to his body at that time the Old Man talked of making it invulnerable for after I returned to it, I found it seeming both emptier and stonier than before."

Staring back down the ramp, the Mouser thought he heard from somewhere ahead, against the terrible silence, the faintest of windy groans.

"I grew to know my twin's body very well, for I was in it most of seven years in the tomb. Somewhere during that black period all fear and horror vanished—I had become habituated to death. For the first time in my life my will, my cold intelligence, had time to grow. Physically fettered, existing almost without sensation, I gained inward power. I began to see what I could never see before—Anra's weaknesses.

"For he could never cut me wholly off from him. The chain he had forged between our minds was too strong for that. No matter how far away he went, no matter what screens he raised up, I could always see into some sector of his mind, dimly, like a scene at the end of a long, narrow, shadowy corridor.

"I saw his pride—a silver-armored wound. I watched his ambition stalk among the stars as if they were jewels set on black velvet in his treasure house to be. I felt, almost as if it were my own, his choking hatred of the bland, miserly gods almighty fathers who lock up the secrets of the universe, smile at our pleas, frown, shake their heads, forbid, chastise; and his groaning rage at the bonds of space and time, as if each cubit he could not see and tread upon were a silver manacle on his wrist, as if each moment before or after his own life were a silver crucifying nail. I walked through the gale-blown halls of his loneliness and glimpsed the beauty that he cherished —shadowy, glittering forms that cut the soul like knives – and once I came upon the dungeon of his love, where no light came to show it was corpses that were fondled and bones kissed. I grew familiar with his desires, which demanded a universe of miracles peopled by unveiled gods. And his lust, which quivered at the world as at a woman, frantic to know each hidden part.

"Happily, for I was learning at long last to hate him, I noted how, though he possessed my body, he could not use it easily and bravely as I had. He could not laugh, or love, or dare. He must instead hang back, peer, purse his lips, withdraw."

More than halfway down the ramp, it seemed to the Mouser

that the groan was repeated, louder, more whistlingly.

"He and the Old Man started on a new cycle of study and experience that took them, I think, to all corners of the world and that they were confident, I'm sure, would open to them those black realms wherein their powers would become infinite. Anxiously from my cramped vantage-point I watched their quest ripen and then, to my delight, rot. Their outstretched fingers just missed the next handhold in the dark. There was something that both of them lacked. Anra became bitter, blamed the Old Man for their lack of success. They quarreled.

"When I saw Anra's failure become final, I mocked him with my laughter, not of lips but of mind. From here to the stars he could not have escaped it—it was then he would have killed me. But he dared not while I was in his own body, and I now had the power to bar him from that.

"Perhaps it was my faint thought-laughter that turned his desperate mind to you and to the secret of the laughter of the Elder Gods—that, and his need of magical aid in regaining his body. For a while then I almost feared he had found a new avenue of escape—or advance—until this morning before the tomb, with sheer cruel joy, I saw you spit on his offers, challenge, and, helped by my laughter, kill him. Now there is only the Old Man to fear."

Passing again under the massive multiple archway with its oddly recessed keystone, they heard the whistling groan once more repeated, and this time there was no mistaking its reality, its nearness, its direction. Hastening to a shadowy and particularly misty corner of the chamber, they made out an inner window set level with the floor, and in that window they saw a face that seemed to float bodyless on the thick fog. Its features defied recognition it might have been a distillation of all the ancient, disillusioned faces in the world. There was no beard below the sunken cheeks.

Coming close as they dared, they saw that it was perhaps not entirely bodyless or without support. There was the ghostly suggestion of tatters of clothing or flesh trailing off, a pulsating sack that might have been a lung, and silver chains with hooks or claws.

Then the one eye remaining to that shameful fragment opened and fixed upon Ahura, and the shrunken lips twisted themselves into the caricature of a smile.

"Like you, Ahura," the fragment murmured in the highest of

falsettos, "he sent me on an errand I did not want to run."

As one, moved by a fear they dared not formulate, Fafhrd and the Mouser and Ahura half turned round and peered over their shoulders at the mist-clogged doorway leading outside. For three, four heartbeats they peered. Then, faintly, they heard one of the horses whinny. Whereupon they turned fully round, but not before a dagger, sped by the yet unshaking hand of Fafhrd, had buried itself in the open eye of the tortured thing in the inner window.

Side by side they stood, Fafhrd wild-eyed, the Mouser taut, Ahura with the look of someone who, having successfully climbed a precipice, slips at the very summit.

A slim shadowy bulk mounted into the glow outside the doorway.

"Laugh!" Fafhrd hoarsely commanded Ahura. "Laugh!" He shook her, repeating the command.

Her head flopped from side to side, the cords in her neck jerked, her lips twitched, but from them came only a dry croaking. She grimaced despairingly.

"Yes," remarked a voice they all recognized, "there are times and places where laughter is an easily-blunted weapon –as harmless as the sword which this morning pierced me through."

Death-pale as always, the tiny blood-clot over his heart, his forehead crumpled in, his black garb travel-dusted, Anra Devadoris faced them.

"And so we come back to the beginning," he said slowly, "But now a wider circle looms ahead."

Fafhrd tried to speak, to laugh, but the words and laughter choked in his throat.

"Now you have learned something of my history and my power, as I intended you should," the adept continued. "You have had time to weigh and reconsider. I still await your answer."

This time it was the Mouser who sought to speak or laugh and failed.

For a moment the adept continued to regard them, smiling confidently. Then his gaze wandered beyond them. He frowned suddenly and strode forward, pushed past them, knelt by the inner window.

As soon as his back was turned Ahura tugged at the Mouser's sleeve, tried to whisper something –with no more success than one deaf and dumb.

They heard the adept sob, "He was my nicest."

The Mouser drew a dagger, prepared to steal on him from behind, but Ahura dragged him back, pointing in a very different direction.

The adept whirled on them. "Fools!" he cried, "have you no inner eye for the wonders of darkness, no sense of the grandeur of horror, no feeling for a quest beside which all other adventurings fade in nothingness, that you should destroy my greatest miracle—slay my dearest oracle? I let you come here to Mist, confident its mighty music and glorious vistas would win you to my view—and thus I am repaid. The jealous, ignorant powers ring me round –you are my great hope fallen. There were unfavorable portents as I walked from the Lost City. The white, idiot glow of Ormadz faintly dirtied the black sky. I heard in the wind the senile clucking of the Elder Gods. There was a fumbling abroad, as if even incompetent Ningauble, last and stupidest of the hunting pack, were catching up. I had a charm in reserve to thwart them, but it needed the Old Man to carry it. Now they close in for the kill. But there are still some moments of power left me and I am not wholly yet without allies. Though I am doomed, there are still those bound to me by such ties that they must answer me if I call upon them. You shall not see the end, if end there be." With that he lifted his voice in a great eerie shout, "Father! Father!"

The echoes had not died before Fafhrd rushed at him, his great sword singing.

The Mouser would have followed suit except that, just as he shook Ahura off, he realized at what she was so insistently pointing.

The recess in the keystone above the mighty archway.

Without hesitation he unslipped his climbing rope, and running lightly across the chamber, made a whistling cast.

The hook caught in the recess.

Hand over hand he climbed up.

Behind him he heard the desperate skirl of swords, heard also another sound, far more distant and profound.

His hand gripped the lip of the recess, he pulled himself up and thrust in head and shoulders, steadying himself on hip and elbow. After a moment, with his free hand, he whipped out his dagger.

Inside, the recess was hollowed like a bowl. It was filled with a foul greenish liquid and incrusted with glowing minerals. At

the bottom, covered by the liquid, were several objects three of them rectangular, the others irregularly round and rhythmically pulsating.

He raised his dagger, but for the moment did not, could not, strike. There was too crushing a weight of things to be realized and remembered -what Ahura had told about the ritual marriage in her mother's family her suspicion that, although she and Anra were born together, they were not children of the same father—how her Greek father had died (and now the Mouser guessed at the hands of what)—the strange affinity for stone the slave-physician had noted in Anra's body—what she had said about an operation performed on him -why a heart-thrust had not killed him why his skull had cracked so hollowly and egg-shell easy—how he had never seemed to breathe old legends of other sorcerers who had made themselves invulnerable by hiding their hearts—above all, the deep kinship all of them had sensed between Anra and this half-living castle—the black, man-shaped monolith in the Lost City—

As if pinioned by a nightmare, he helplessly heard the clash of swords rise toward a climax, heard it blotted out by the other sound a gargantuan stony clomping that seemed to be following their course up the mountain, like a pursuing earthquake—

The Castle Called Mist began to tremble, and still he could not strike—

Then, as if surging across infinity from that utmost rim beyond which the Elder Gods had retreated, relinquishing the world to younger deities, he heard a mighty, star-shaking laughter that laughed at all things, even at this; and there was power in the laughter, and he knew the power was his to use.

With a downward sweep of his arm he sent his dagger plunging into the green liquid and tearing through the stone-crusted heart and brain and lungs and guts of Anra Devadoris.

The liquid foamed and boiled, the castle rocked until he was almost shaken from the niche, the laughter and stony clomping rose to a pandemonium.

Then, in an instant it seemed, all sound and movement ceased. The Mouser's muscles went weak. He half fell, half slid, to the floor. Looking about dazedly, making no attempt to rise, he saw Fafhrd wrench his sword from the fallen adept and totter back until his groping hand found the support of a table-edge,

saw Ahura, still gasping from the laughter that had possessed her, go up and kneel beside her brother and cradle his crushed head on her knees.

No word was spoken. Time passed. The green mist seemed to be slowly thinning.

Then a small black shape swooped into the room through a high window and the Mouser grinned.

"Hugin," he called luringly.

The shape swooped obediently to his sleeve and clung there, head down. He detached from the bat's leg a tiny parchment.

"Fancy, Fafhrd, it's from the commander of our rear guard," he announced gayly. "Listen:

"'To my agents Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, funeral greetings! I have regretfully given up all hope for you, and yet—token of my great affection—I risk my own dear Hugin in order to get this last message through. Incidentally, Hugin, if given opportunity, will return to me from Mist something I am afraid you will not be able to do. So if, before you die, you see anything interesting –and I am sure you will—kindly scribble me a memorandum. Remember the proverb: Knowledge takes precedence over death. Farewell for two thousand years, dearest friends. Ningauble.'"

"That demands drink," said Fafhrd, and walked out into the darkness. The Mouser yawned and stretched himself, Ahura stirred, printed a kiss on the waxen face of her brother, lifted the trifling weight of his head from her lap, and laid it gently on the stone floor. From somewhere in the upper reaches of the castle they heard a faint crackling.

Presently Fafhrd returned, striding more briskly, with two jars of wine under his arm.

"Friends," he announced, "the moon's come out, and by its light this castle begins to look remarkably small. I think the mist must have been dusted with some green drug that made us see sizes wrong. We must have been drugged, I'll swear, for we never saw something that's standing plain as day at the bottom of the stairs with its foot on the first step a black statue that's twin brother to the one in the Lost City."

The Mouser lifted his eyebrows. "And if we went back to the Lost City...?" he asked.

"Why," said Fafhrd, "we might find that those fool Persian farmers, who admitted hating the thing, had knocked down the statue there, and broken it up, and hidden the pieces." He was

silent for a moment. Then, "Here's wine," he rumbled, "to sluice the green drug from our throats."

The Mouser smiled. He knew that hereafter Fafhrd would refer to their present adventure as "the time we were drugged on a mountaintop."

They all three sat on a table-edge and passed the two jars endlessly round. The green mist faded to such a degree that Fafhrd, ignoring his claims about the drug, began to argue that even it was an illusion. The crackling from above increased in volume; the Mouser guessed that the impious rolls in the library, no longer shielded by the damp, were bursting into flame. Some proof of this was given when the abortive bear cub, which they had completely forgotten, came waddling frightenedly down the ramp. A trace of decorous down was already sprouting from its naked hide. Fafhrd dribbled some wine on its snout and held it up to the Mouser.

"It wants to be kissed," he rumbled.

"Kiss it yourself, in memory of pig-trickery," replied the Mouser.

This talk of kissing turned their thoughts to Ahura. Their rivalry forgotten, at least for the present, they persuaded her to help them determine whether her brother's spells were altogether broken. A moderate number of hugs demonstrated this clearly.

"Which reminds me," said the Mouser brightly, "now that our business here is over, isn't it time we started, Fafhrd, for your lusty Northland and all that bracing snow?"

Fafhrd drained one jar dry and picked up the other.

"The Northland?" he ruminated. "What is it but a stamping ground of petty, frost-whiskered kinglets who know not the amenities of life. That's why I left the place. Go back? By Thor's smelly jerkin, not now!"

The Mouser smiled knowingly and sipped from the remaining jar. Then, noticing the bat still clinging to his sleeve, he took stylus, ink, and a scrap of parchment from his pouch, and, with Ahura giggling over his shoulder, wrote:

"To my aged brother in petty abominations, greetings! It is with the deepest regret that I must report the outrageously lucky and completely unforeseen escape of two rude and unsympathetic fellows from the Castle Called Mist. Before leaving, they expressed to me the intention of returning to someone called Ningauble—you are Ningauble, master, are you not?—and

lopping off six of his seven eyes for souvenirs. So I think it only fair to warn you. Believe me, I am your friend. One of the fellows was very tall and at times his bellowings seemed to resemble speech. Do you know him? The other fancied a gray garb and was of extreme wit and personal beauty, given to . . ."

Had any of them been watching the corpse of Anra Devadoris at this moment, they would have seen a slight twitching of the lower jaw. At last the mouth came open, and out leapt a tiny black mouse. The cub-like creature, to whom Fafhrd's fondling and the wine had imparted the seeds of self-confidence, lurched drunkenly at it, and the mouse began a squeaking scurry toward the wall. A wine jar, hurled by Fafhrd, shattered on the crack into which it shot; Fafhrd had seen, or thought he had seen, the untoward place from which the mouse had come.

"Mice in his mouth," he hiccupped. "What dirty habits for a pleasant young man! A nasty, degrading business, this thinking oneself an adept."

"I am reminded," said the Mouser, "of what a witch told me about adepts. She said that, if an adept chances to die, his soul is reincarnated in a mouse. If, as a mouse, he managed to kill a rat, his soul passes over into a rat. As a rat, he must kill a cat; as a cat, a wolf; as a wolf, a panther; and, as a panther, a man. Then he can recommence his adeptry. Of course, it seldom happens that anyone gets all the way through the sequence and in any case it takes a very long time. Trying to kill a rat is enough to satisfy a mouse with mousedom."

Fafhrd solemnly denied the possibility of any such foolery, and Ahura cried until she decided that being a mouse would interest rather than dishearten her peculiar brother. More wine was drunk from the remaining jar. The crackling from the rooms above had become a roar, and a bright red glow consumed the dark shadows. The three adventurers prepared to leave the place.

Meantime the mouse, or another very much like it, thrust its head from the crack and began to lick the wine-damp shards, keeping a fearful eye upon those in the great room, but especially upon the strutting little would-be bear.

A great blast of wind, cold and pure, blew away the last lingering of Mist. As they went through the doorway they saw, outspread above them, the self-consistent stars.

Transition

The Man Who Never Grew Young

MAOT IS BECOMING RESTLESS. Often toward evening she trudges to where the black earth meets the yellow sand and stands looking across the desert until the wind starts.

But I sit with my back to the reed screen and watch the Nile.

It isn't just that she's growing young. She is wearying of the fields. She leaves their tilling to me and lavishes her attentions on the flock. Every day she takes the sheep and goats farther to pasture.

I have seen it coming for a long time. For generations the fields have been growing scantier and less diligently irrigated. There seems to be more rain. The houses have become simpler mere walled tents. And every year some family gathers its flocks and wanders off west.

Why should I cling so tenaciously to these poor relics of civilization—I, who have seen king Cheops' men take down the Great Pyramid block by block and return it to the hills?

I often wonder why I never grow young. It is still as much a mystery to me as to the brown farmers who kneel in awe when I walk past.

I envy those who grow young I yearn for the sloughing of wisdom and responsibility, the plunge into a period of lovemaking and breathless excitement, the carefree years before the end.

But I remain a bearded man of thirty-odd, wearing the goat-skin as I once wore the doublet or the toga, always on the brink of that plunge yet never making it.

It seems to me that I have always been this way. Why, I cannot even remember my own disinterment, and everyone remembers that.

Maot is subtle. She does not ask for what she wants, but when she comes home at evening she sits far back from the fire and murmurs disturbing fragments of song and rubs her eyelids with green pigment to make herself desirable to me and tries in every way to infect me with her restlessness. She tempts me from the hot work at midday and points out how hardy our sheep and goat are becoming.

There are no young men among us any more. All of them start for the desert with the approach of youth, or before. Even toothless, scrawny patriarchs uncurl from their grave-holes, and hardly pausing to refresh themselves with the food and drink dug up with them, collect their flocks and wives and hobble off into the west.

I remember the first disinterment I witnessed. It was in a country of smoke and machines and constant news. But what I am about to relate occurred in a backwater where there were still small farms and narrow roads and simple ways.

There were two old women named Flora and Helen. It could not have been more than a few years since their own disinterments, but those I cannot remember. I think I was some sort of nephew, but I cannot be sure.

They began to visit an old grave in the cemetery a half mile outside town. I remember the little bouquets of flowers they would bring back with them. Their prim, placid faces became troubled. I could see that grief was entering their lives.

The years passed. Their visits to the cemetery became more frequent. Accompanying them once, I noted that the worn inscription on the headstone was growing clearer and sharper, just as was happening to their own features. "John, loving husband of Flora...."

Often Flora would sob through half the night, and Helen went about with a set look on her face. Relatives came and spoke

comforting words, but these seemed only to intensify their grief.

Finally the headstone grew brand-new and the grass became tender green shoots which disappeared into the raw brown earth. As if these were the signs their obscure instincts had been awaiting, Flora and Helen mastered their grief and visited the minister and the mortician and the doctor and made certain arrangements.

On a cold autumn day, when the brown curled leaves were whirling up into the trees, the procession set out—the empty hearse, the dark silent automobiles At the cemetery we found a couple of men with shovels turning away unobtrusively from the newly opened grave. Then, while Flora and Helen wept bitterly and the minister spoke solemn words, a long narrow box was lifted from the grave and carried to the hearse.

At home the lid of the box was unscrewed and slid back, and we saw John, a waxen old man with a long life before him.

Next day, in obedience to what seemed an age-old ritual, they took him from the box, and the mortician undressed him and drew a pungent liquid from his veins and injected the red blood. Then they took him and laid him in bed. After a few hours of stoney-eyed waiting, the blood began to work He stirred and his first breath rattled in his throat. Flora sat down on the bed and strained him to her in a fearful embrace.

But he was very sick and in need of rest, so the doctor waved her from the room. I remember the look on her face as she closed the door.

I should have been happy too, but I seem to recall that I felt there was something unwholesome about the whole episode. Perhaps our first experiences of the great crises of life always affect us in some such fashion.

I love Maot. The hundreds I have loved before her in my wanderings down the world do not take away from the sincerity of my affection. I did not enter her life, or theirs, as lovers ordinarily do from the grave or in the passion of some terrible quarrel. I am always the drifter.

Maot knows there is something strange about me. But she does not let that interfere with her efforts to make me do the thing she wants.

I love Maot and eventually I will accede to her desire. But first I will linger a while by the Nile and the mighty pageantry conjured up by its passage.

My first memories are always the most difficult and I struggle

the hardest to interpret them. I have the feeling that if I could get back a little beyond them, a terrifying understanding would come to me. But I never seem able to make the necessary effort.

They begin without antecedent in cloud and turmoil, darkness and fear. I am a citizen of a great country far away, beardless and wearing ugly confining clothing, but no different in age and appearance from today. The country is a hundred times bigger than Egypt, yet it is only one of many. All the peoples of the world are known to each other, and the world is round, not flat, and it floats in an endless immensity dotted with islands of suns, not confined under a star-speckled bowl.

Machines are everywhere, and news goes round the world like a shout, and desires are many. There is undreamed-of abundance, unrivaled opportunities. Yet men are not happy. They live in fear. The fear, if I recall rightly, is of a war that will engulf and perhaps destroy us all. It overhangs us like the dark.

The weapons they have ready for that war are terrible. Great engines that sail pilotless, not through the water but the air, halfway around the world to destroy some enemy city. Others that dart up beyond the air itself, to come in attacking from the stars. Poisoned clouds. Deadly motes of luminous dust.

But worst of all are the weapons that are only rumored.

For months that seem eternities we wait on the brink of that war. We know that the mistakes have been made, the irrevocable steps taken, the last chances lost. We only await the event.

It would seem that there must have been some special reason for the extremity of our hopelessness and horror. As if there had been previous worldwide wars and we had struggled back from each desperately promising ourselves that it would be the last. But of any such, I can remember nothing. I and the world might well have been created under the shadow of that catastrophe, in a universal disinterment.

The months wear on. Then, miraculously, unbelievably, the war begins to recede. The tension relaxes. The clouds lift. There is great activity, conferences and plans. Hopes for lasting peace ride high.

This does not last. In sudden holocaust, there arises an oppressor named Hitler. Odd, how that name should come back to me after these millennia. His armies fan out across the globe.

But their success is short-lived. They are driven back, and Hitler trails off into oblivion. In the end he is an obscure agitator, almost forgotten.

Another peace then, but neither does it last. Another war, less fierce than the preceding, and it too trails off into a quieter era.

And so on.

I sometimes think (I must hold on to this) that time once flowed in the opposite direction, and that, in revulsion from the ultimate war, it turned back upon itself and began to retrace its former course. That our present lives are only a return and an unwinding. A great retreat.

In that case time may turn again. We may have another chance to scale the barrier.

But no...

The thought has vanished in the rippling Nile.

Another family is leaving the valley today. All morning they have toiled up the sandy gorge. And now, returning perhaps for a last glimpse, to the verge of the yellow cliffs, they are outlined against the morning sky—upright specks for men, flat specks for animals.

Maot watches beside me. But she makes no comment. She is sure of me.

The cliff is bare again. Soon they will have forgotten the Nile and its disturbing ghosts of memories.

All our life is a forgetting and a closing in. As the child is absorbed by its mother, so great thoughts are swallowed up in the mind of genius. At first they are everywhere. They environ us like the air. Then there is a narrowing in. Not all men know them. Then there comes one great man, and he takes them to himself, and they are a secret. There only remains the disturbing conviction that something worthy has vanished.

I have seen Shakespeare unwrite the great plays. I have watched Socrates unthink the great thoughts. I have heard Jesus unsay the great words.

There is an inscription in stone, and it seems eternal. Coming back centuries later I find it the same, only a little less worn, and I think that it, at least, may endure. But some day a scribe comes and laboriously fills in the grooves until there is only blank stone.

Then only he knows what was written there. And as he grows young, that knowledge dies forever.

It is the same in all we do. Our houses grow new and we dismantle them and stow the materials inconspicuously away, in mine and quarry, forest and field. Our clothes grow new and we

put them off. And we grow new and forget and blindly seek a mother.

All the people are gone now. Only I and Maot linger.

I had not realized it would come so soon. Now that we are near the end, Nature seems to hurry.

I suppose that there are other stragglers here and there along the Nile, but I like to think that we are the last to see the vanishing fields, the last to look upon the river with some knowledge of what it once symbolized, before oblivion closes in.

Ours is a world in which lost causes conquer. After the second war of which I spoke, there was a long period of peace in my native country across the sea. There were among us at that time a primitive people called Indians, neglected and imposed upon and forced to live apart in unwanted areas. We gave no thought to these people. We would have laughed at anyone who told us they had power to hurt us.

But from somewhere a spark of rebellion appeared among them. They formed bands, armed themselves with bows and inferior guns, took the warpath against us.

We fought them in little unimportant wars that were never quite conclusive. They persisted, always returning to the fight, laying ambushes for our men and wagons, harrying us continually, eventually making sizable inroads.

Yet we still considered them of such trifling importance that we found time to engage in a civil war among ourselves.

The issue of this war was sad. A dusky portion of our citizenry were enslaved and made to toil for us in house and field.

The Indians grew formidable. Step by step they drove us back across the wide midwestern rivers and plains, through the wooded mountains to eastward.

On the eastern coast we held for a while, chiefly by leaguing with a transoceanic island nation, to whom we surrendered our independence.

There was an enheartening occurrence. The enslaved Negroes were gathered together and crowded in ships and taken to the southern shores of this continent, and there liberated or given into the hands of warlike tribes who eventually released them.

But the pressure of the Indians, sporadically aided by foreign allies, increased. City by city, town by town, settlement by settlement, we pulled up our stakes and took ship ourselves

across the sea. Toward the end the Indians became strangely pacific, so that the last boatloads seemed to flee not so much in physical fear as in supernatural terror of the green silent forests that had swallowed up their homes.

To the south the Aztecs took up their glass knives and flint-edged swords and drove out the... I think they were called Spaniards.

In another century the whole western continent was forgotten, save for dim, haunting recollections.

Growing tyranny and ignorance, a constant contraction of frontiers, rebellions of the downtrodden, who in turn became oppressors these constituted the next epoch of history.

Once I thought the tide had turned. A strong and orderly people, the Romans, arose and put most of the diminished world under their sway.

But this stability proved transitory. Once again the governed rose against the governors. The Romans were driven back—from England, from Egypt, from Gaul, from Asia, from Greece. Rising from barren fields came Carthage to contest successfully Rome's preeminence. The Romans took refuge in Rome, became unimportant, dwindled, were lost in a maze of migrations.

Their energizing thoughts flamed up for one glorious century in Athens, then ceased to carry weight.

After that, the decline continued at a steady pace Never again was I deceived into thinking the trend had changed.

Except this one last time.

Because she was stony and sun-drenched and dry, full of temples and tombs, given to custom and calm, I thought Egypt would endure. The passage of almost changeless centuries encouraged me in this belief. I thought that if we had not reached the turning point, we had at least come to rest.

But the rains have come, the temples and tombs fill the scars in the cliffs, and the custom and calm have given way to the restless urges of the nomad.

If there is a turning point, it will not come until man is one with the beasts.

And Egypt must vanish like the rest.

Tomorrow Maot and I set out. Our flock is gathered. Our tent is rolled.

Maot is afire with youth. She is very loving.

It will be strange in the desert. All too soon we will exchange

our last and sweetest kiss and she will prattle to me childishly and I will look after her until we find her mother.

Or perhaps some day I will abandon her in the desert, and her mother will find her.

And I will go on.

Modern Horrors

Smoke Ghost

MISS MILLICK WONDERED just what had happened to Mr. Wran. He kept making the strangest remarks when she took dictation. Just this morning he had quickly turned around and asked, "Have you ever seen a ghost, Miss Millick?" And she had tittered nervously and replied, "When I was a girl there was a thing in white that used to come out of the closet in the attic bedroom when I slept there, and moan. Of course it was just my imagination. I was frightened of lots of things." And he had said, "I don't mean that kind of ghost. I mean a ghost from the world today, with the soot of the factories on its face and the pounding of machinery in its soul. The kind that would haunt coal yards and slip around at night through deserted office buildings like this one. A real ghost. Not something out of books." And she hadn't known what to say.

He'd never been like this before. Of course he might be joking, but it didn't sound that way. Vaguely Miss Millick wondered whether he mightn't be seeking some sort of sympathy from her. Of course, Mr. Wran was married and had a little

child, but that didn't prevent her from having daydreams. The daydreams were not very exciting, still they helped fill up her mind. But now he was asking her another of those unprecedented questions.

"Have you ever thought what a ghost of our times would look like, Miss Millick? Just picture it. A smoky composite face with the hungry anxiety of the unemployed, the neurotic restlessness of the person without purpose, the jerky tension of the high-pressure metropolitan worker, the uneasy resentment of the striker, the callous opportunism of the scab, the aggressive whine of the panhandler, the inhibited terror of the bombed civilian, and a thousand other twisted emotional patterns. Each one overlying and yet blending with the other, like a pile of semi-transparent masks?"

Miss Millick gave a little self-conscious shiver and said, "That would be terrible. What an awful thing to think of."

She peered furtively across the desk. She remembered having heard that there had been something impressively abnormal about Mr. Wran's childhood, but she couldn't recall what it was. If only she could do something – laugh at his mood or ask him what was really wrong. She shifted the extra pencils in her left hand and mechanically traced over some of the shorthand curlicues in her notebook.

"Yet, that's just what such a ghost or vitalized projection would look like, Miss Millick," he continued, smiling in a tight way. "It would grow out of the real world. It would reflect the tangled, sordid, vicious things. All the loose ends. And it would be very grimy. I don't think it would seem white or wispy, or favor graveyards. It wouldn't moan. But it would mutter unintelligibly, and twitch at your sleeve. Like a sick, surly ape. What would such a thing want from a person, Miss Millick? Sacrifice? Worship? Or just fear? What could you do to stop it from troubling you?"

Miss Millick giggled nervously. There was an expression beyond her powers of definition in Mr. Wran's ordinary, flat-cheeked, thirtyish face, silhouetted against the dusty window. He turned away and stared out into the gray downtown atmosphere that rolled in from the railroad yards and the mills. When he spoke again his voice sounded far away.

"Of course, being immaterial, it couldn't hurt you physically –at first. You'd have to be peculiarly sensitive to see it, or be aware of it at all. But it would begin to influence your

actions. Make you do this. Stop you from doing that. Although only a projection, it would gradually get its hooks into the world of things as they are. Might even get control of suitably vacuous minds. Then it could hurt whomever it wanted."

Miss Millick squirmed and read back her shorthand, like the books said you should do when there was a pause. She became aware of the failing light and wished Mr Wran would ask her to turn on the overhead. She felt scratchy, as if soot were sifting down on to her skin.

"It's a rotten world, Miss Millick," said Mr. Wran, talking at the window. "Fit for another morbid growth of superstition. It's time the ghosts, or whatever you call them, took over and began a rule of fear. They'd be no worse than men."

"But"—Miss Millick's diaphragm jerked, making her titter inanely—"of course, there aren't any such things as ghosts."

Mr. Wran turned around.

"Of course there aren't, Miss Millick," he said in a loud, patronizing voice, as if she had been doing the talking rather than he. "Science and common sense and psychiatry all go to prove it."

She hung her head and might even have blushed if she hadn't felt so all at sea. Her leg muscles twitched, making her stand up, although she hadn't intended to. She aimlessly rubbed her hand along the edge of the desk.

"Why, Mr. Wran, look what I got off your desk," she said, showing him a heavy smudge. There was a note of clumsily playful reproof in her voice. "No wonder the copy I bring you always gets so black. Somebody ought to talk to those scrubwomen. They're skimping on your room."

She wished he would make some normal joking reply. But instead he drew back and his face hardened.

"Well, to get back," he rapped out harshly, and began to dictate.

When she was gone, he jumped up, dabbed his finger experimentally at the smudged part of the desk, frowned worriedly at the almost inky smears. He jerked open a drawer, snatched out a rag, hastily swabbed off the desk, crumpled the rag into a ball and tossed it back. There were three or four other rags in the drawer, each impregnated with soot.

Then he went over to the window and peered out anxiously through the dusk, his eyes searching the panorama of roofs, fixing on each chimney and water tank.

"It's a neurosis. Must be. Compulsions. Hallucinations," he muttered to himself in a tired, distraught voice that would have made Miss Millick gasp. "It's that damned mental abnormality cropping up in a new form. Can't be any other explanation. But it's so damned real. Even the soot. Good thing I'm seeing the psychiatrist. I don't think I could force myself to get on the elevated tonight." His voice trailed off, he rubbed his eyes, and his memory automatically started to grind.

It had all begun on the elevated. There was a particular little sea of roofs he had grown into the habit of glancing at just as the packed car carrying him homeward lurched around a turn. A dingy, melancholy little world of tar-paper, tarred gravel, and smoky brick. Rusty tin chimneys with odd conical hats suggested abandoned listening posts. There was a washed-out advertisement of some ancient patent medicine on the nearest wall. Superficially it was like ten thousand other drab city roofs. But he always saw it around dusk, either in the smoky half-light, or tinged with red by the flat rays of a dirty sunset, or covered by ghostly windblown white sheets of rain-splash, or patched with blackish snow; and it seemed unusually bleak and suggestive; almost beautifully ugly though in no sense picturesque; dreary, but meaningful. Unconsciously it came to symbolize for Catesby Wran certain disagreeable aspects of the frustrated, frightened century in which he lived, the jangled century of hate and heavy industry and total wars. The quick daily glance into the half darkness became an integral part of his life. Oddly, he never saw it in the morning, for it was then his habit to sit on the other side of the car, his head buried in the paper.

One evening toward winter he noticed what seemed to be a shapeless black sack lying on the third roof from the tracks. He did not think about it. It merely registered as an addition to the well-known scene and his memory stored away the impression for further reference. Next evening, however, he decided he had been mistaken in one detail. The object was a roof nearer than he had thought. Its color and texture, and the grimy stains around it, suggested that it was filled with coal dust, which was hardly reasonable. Then, too, the following evening it seemed to have been blown against a rusty ventilator by the wind—which could hardly have happened if it were at all heavy. Perhaps it was filled with leaves. Catesby was surprised to find himself anticipating his next daily glance with a minor note of apprehension. There was something unwholesome in the posture of the thing that

stuck in his mind—a bulge in the sacking that suggested a misshaped head peering around the ventilator. And his apprehension was justified, for that evening the thing was on the nearest roof, though on the farther side, looking as if it had just flopped down over the low brick parapet.

Next evening the sack was gone. Catesby was annoyed at the momentary feeling of relief that went through him, because the whole matter seemed too unimportant to warrant feelings of any sort. What difference did it make if his imagination had played tricks on him, and he'd fancied that the object was slowly crawling and hitching itself closer across the roofs? That was the way any normal imagination worked. He deliberately chose to disregard the fact that there were reasons for thinking his imagination was by no means a normal one As he walked home from the elevated, however, he found himself wondering whether the sack was really gone. He seemed to recall a vague, smudgy trail leading across the gravel to the nearer side of the roof, which was masked by a parapet. For an instant an unpleasant picture formed in his mind that of an inky, humped creature crouched behind the parapet, waiting.

The next time he felt the familiar grating lurch of the car, he caught himself trying not to look out. That angered him. He turned his head quickly. When he turned it back, his compact face was definitely pale. There had been only time for a fleeting rearward glance at the escaping roof. Had he actually seen in silhouette the upper part of a head of some sort peering over the parapet? Nonsense, he told himself. And even if he had seen something, there were a thousand explanations which did not involve the supernatural or even true hallucination. Tomorrow he would take a good look and clear up the whole matter. If necessary, he would visit the roof personally, though he hardly knew where to find it and disliked in any case the idea of pampering a silly fear.

He did not relish the walk home from the elevated that evening, and visions of the thing disturbed his dreams, and were in and out of his mind all next day at the office. It was then that he first began to relieve his nerves by making jokingly serious remarks about the supernatural to Miss Millick, who seemed properly mystified. It was on the same day, too, that he became aware of a growing antipathy to grime and soot. Everything he touched seemed gritty, and he found himself mopping and wiping at his desk like an old lady with a morbid fear of germs.

He reasoned that there was no real change in his office, and that he'd just now become sensitive to the dirt that had always been there, but there was no denying an increasing nervousness. Long before the car reached the curve, he was straining his eyes through the murky twilight, determined to take in every detail.

Afterward he realized he must have given a muffled cry of some sort, for the man beside him looked at him curiously, and the woman ahead gave him an unfavorable stare. Conscious of his own pallor and uncontrollable trembling, he stared back at them hungrily, trying to regain the feeling of security he had completely lost. They were the usual reassuringly wooden-faced people everyone rides home with on the elevated. But suppose he had pointed out to one of them what he had seen—that sodden, distorted face of sacking and coal dust, that boneless paw which waved back and forth, unmistakably in his direction, as if reminding him of a future appointment—he involuntarily shut his eyes tight. His thoughts were racing ahead to tomorrow evening. He pictured this same windowed oblong of light and packed humanity surging around the curve—then an opaque monstrous form leaping out from the roof in a parabolic swoop—an unmentionable face pressed close against the window, smearing it with wet coal dust—huge paws fumbling sloppily at the glass—

Somehow he managed to turn off his wife's anxious inquiries. Next morning he reached a decision and made an appointment for that evening with a psychiatrist a friend had told him about. It cost him a considerable effort, for Catesby had a well-founded distaste for anything dealing with psychological abnormality. Visiting a psychiatrist meant raking up an episode in his past which he had never fully described even to his wife. Once he had made the decision, however, he felt considerably relieved. The psychiatrist, he told himself, would clear everything up. He could almost fancy him saying, "Merely a bad case of nerves. However, you must consult the oculist whose name I'm writing down for you, and you must take two of these pills in water every four hours," and so on. It was almost comforting, and made the coming revelation he would have to make seem less painful.

But as the smoky dusk rolled in, his nervousness had returned and he had let his joking mystification of Miss Millick run away with him until he had realized he wasn't frightening anyone but himself.

He would have to keep his imagination under better control, he told himself, as he continued to peer out restlessly at the massive, murky shapes of the downtown office buildings. Why, he had spent the whole afternoon building up a kind of neo-medieval cosmology of superstition. It wouldn't do. He realized then that he had been standing at the window much longer than he'd thought, for the glass panel in the door was dark and there was no noise coming from the outer office. Miss Millick and the rest must have gone home.

It was then he made the discovery that there would have been no special reason for dreading the swing around the curve that night. It was, as it happened, a horrible discovery. For, on the shadowed roof across the street and four stories below, he saw the thing huddle and roll across the gravel and, after one upward look of recognition, merge into the blackness beneath the water tank.

As he hurriedly collected his things and made for the elevator, fighting the panicky impulse to run, he began to think of hallucination and mild psychosis as very desirable conditions. For better or for worse, he pinned all his hopes on the psychiatrist.

"So you find yourself growing nervous and . . . er . . . jumpy, as you put it," said Dr. Trevethick, smiling with dignified geniality. "Do you notice any more definite physical symptoms? Pain? Headache? Indigestion?"

Catesby shook his head and wet his lips. "I'm especially nervous while riding in the elevated," he murmured swiftly

"I see. We'll discuss that more fully. But I'd like you first to tell me about something you mentioned earlier. You said there was something about your childhood that might predispose you to nervous ailments. As you know, the early years are critical ones in the development of an individual's behavior pattern."

Catesby studied the yellow reflections of frosted globes in the dark surface of the desk. The palm of his left hand aimlessly rubbed the thick nap of the armchair After a while he raised his head and looked straight into the doctor's small brown eyes.

"From perhaps my third to my ninth year," he began, choosing the words with care, "I was what you might call a sensory prodigy."

The doctor's expression did not change. "Yes?" he inquired politely.

"What I mean is that I was supposed to be able to see through walls, read letters through envelopes and books through their covers, fence and play ping-pong blindfolded, find things that were buried, read thoughts." The words tumbled out.

"And could you?" The doctor's voice was toneless.

"I don't know. I don't suppose so," answered Catesby, long-lost emotions flooding back into his voice. "It's all confused now. I thought I could, but then they were always encouraging me. My mother . . . was . . . well . . . interested in psychic phenomena. I was . . . exhibited. I seem to remember seeing things other people couldn't. As if most opaque objects were transparent. But I was very young. I didn't have any scientific criteria for judgment."

He was reliving it now. The darkened rooms. The earnest assemblages of gawking, prying adults. Himself alone on a little platform, lost in a straight-backed wooden chair. The black silk handkerchief over his eyes. His mother's coaxing, insistent questions. The whispers. The gasps. His own hate of the whole business, mixed with hunger for the adulation of adults. Then the scientists from the university, the experiments, the big test. The reality of those memories engulfed him and momentarily made him forget the reason why he was disclosing them to a stranger.

"Do I understand that your mother tried to make use of you as a medium for communicating with the . . . er . . . other world?"

Catesby nodded eagerly. ,

"She tried to, but she couldn't. When it came to getting in touch with the dead, I was a complete failure. All I could do—or thought I could do—was see real, existing, three-dimensional objects beyond the vision of normal people. Objects anyone could have seen except for distance, obstruction, or darkness. It was always a disappointment to mother."

He could hear her sweetish, patient voice saying, "Try again, dear, just this once. Katie was your aunt. She loved you. Try to hear what she's saying." And he had answered, "I can see a woman in a blue dress standing on the other side of Dick's house." And she had replied, "Yes, I know, dear. But that's not Katie. Katie's a spirit. Try again. Just this once, dear." The doctor's voice gently jarred him back into the softly gleaming office.

"You mentioned scientific criteria for judgment, Mr. Wran. As far as you know, did anyone ever try to apply them to you?"

Catesby's nod was emphatic.

"They did. When I was eight, two young psychologists from the university got interested in me. I guess they did it for a joke at first, and I remember being very determined to show them I amounted to something. Even now I seem to recall how the note of polite superiority and amused sarcasm drained out of their voices. I suppose they decided at first that it was very clever trickery, but somehow they persuaded mother to let them try me out under controlled conditions. There were lots of tests that seemed very businesslike after mother's slipshod little exhibitions. They found I was clairvoyant—or so they thought. I got worked up and on edge. They were going to demonstrate my supernormal sensory powers to the university psychology faculty. For the first time I began to worry about whether I'd come through. Perhaps they kept me going at too hard a pace, I don't know. At any rate, when the test came, I couldn't do a thing. Everything became opaque. I got desperate and made things up out of my imagination. I lied. In the end I failed utterly, and I believe the two young psychologists got into a lot of hot water as a result."

He could hear the brusque, bearded man saying, "You've been taken in by a child, Flaxman, a mere child. I'm greatly disturbed. You've put yourself on the same plane as common charlatans. Gentlemen, I ask you to banish from your minds this whole sorry episode. It must never be referred to " He winced at the recollection of his feeling of guilt. But at the same time he was beginning to feel exhilarated and almost light-hearted. Unburdening his long-repressed memories had altered his whole viewpoint. The episodes on the elevated began to take on what seemed their proper proportions as merely the bizarre workings of overwrought nerves and an overly suggestible mind. The doctor, he anticipated confidently, would disentangle the obscure subconscious causes, whatever they might be. And the whole business would be finished off quickly, just as his childhood experience—which was beginning to seem a little ridiculous now– had been finished off.

"From that day on," he continued, "I never exhibited a trace of my supposed powers. My mother was frantic and tried to sue the university. I had something like a nervous breakdown. Then the divorce was granted, and my father got custody of me. He did his best to make me forget it. We went on long outdoor vacations and did a lot of athletics, associated with normal

matter-of-fact people. I went to business college eventually. I'm in advertising now. But," Catesby paused, "now that I'm having nervous symptoms, I've wondered if there mightn't be a connection. It's not a question of whether I was really clairvoyant or not. Very likely my mother taught me a lot of unconscious deceptions, good enough to fool even young psychology instructors. But don't you think it may have some important bearing on my present condition?"

For several moments the doctor regarded him with a professional frown. Then he said quietly, "And is there some . . . er . . . more specific connection between your experiences then and now? Do you by any chance find that you are once again beginning to . . . er . . . see things?"

Catesby swallowed. He had felt an increasing eagerness to unburden himself of his fears, but it was not easy to make a beginning, and the doctor's shrewd question rattled him. He forced himself to concentrate. The thing he thought he had seen on the roof loomed up before his inner eye with unexpected vividness. Yet it did not frighten him. He groped for words.

Then he saw that the doctor was not looking at him but over his shoulder. Color was draining out of the doctor's face and his eyes did not seem so small. Then the doctor sprang to his feet, walked past Catesby, threw up the window and peered into the darkness.

As Catesby rose, the doctor slammed down the window and said in a voice whose smoothness was marred by a slight, persistent gasping, "I hope I haven't alarmed you. I saw the face of . . . er . . . a Negro prowler on the fire escape. I must have frightened him, for he seems to have gotten out of sight in a hurry. Don't give it another thought. Doctors are frequently bothered by *voyeurs* . . . er . . . Peeping Toms."

"A Negro?" asked Catesby, moistening his lips.

The doctor laughed nervously. "I imagine so, though my first odd impression was that it was a white man in blackface. You see, the color didn't seem to have any brown in it. It was dead-black."

Catesby moved toward the window. There were smudges on the glass. "It's quite all right, Mr. Wran." The doctor's voice had acquired a sharp note of impatience, as if he were trying hard to reassume his professional authority. "Let's continue our conversation. I was asking you if you were"—he made a face—"seeing things."

Catesby's whirling thoughts slowed down and locked into place. "No, I'm not seeing anything that other people don't see, too. And I think I'd better go now. I've been keeping you too long." He disregarded the doctor's half-hearted gesture of denial. "I'll phone you about the physical examination In a way you've already taken a big load off my mind." He smiled woodenly. "Goodnight, Dr. Trevethick."

Catesby Wran's mental state was a peculiar one. His eyes searched every angular shadow, he glanced sideways down each chasm-like alley and barren basement passageway, and kept stealing looks at the irregular line of the roofs, yet he was hardly conscious of where he was going. He pushed away the thoughts that came into his mind, and kept moving. He became aware of a slight sense of security as he turned into a lighted street where there were people and high buildings and blinking signs. After a while he found himself in the dim lobby of the structure that housed his office. Then he realized why he couldn't go home, why he daren't go home - after what had happened at the office of Dr. Trevethick.

"Hello, Mr. Wran," said the night elevator man, a burly figure in overalls, sliding open the grille-work door to the old-fashioned cage. "I didn't know you were working nights now, too."

Catesby stepped in automatically "Sudden rush of orders," he murmured inanely. "Some stuff that has to be gotten out."

The cage creaked to a stop at the top floor. "Be working very late, Mr. Wran?"

He nodded vaguely, watched the car slide out of sight, found his keys, swiftly crossed the outer office, and entered his own His hand went out to the light switch, but then the thought occurred to him that the two lighted windows, standing out against the dark bulk of the building, would indicate his whereabouts and serve as a goal toward which something could crawl and climb. He moved his chair so that the back was against the wall and sat down in the semidarkness. He did not remove his overcoat.

For a long time he sat there motionless, listening to his own breathing and the faraway sounds from the streets below: the thin metallic surge of the crosstown streetcar, the farther one of the elevated, faint lonely cries and honkings, indistinct rumblings. Words he had spoken to Miss Millick in nervous jest

came back to him with the bitter taste of truth. He found himself unable to reason critically or connectedly, but by their own volition thoughts rose up into his mind and gyrated slowly and rearranged themselves with the inevitable movement of planets.

Gradually his mental picture of the world was transformed. No longer a world of material atoms and empty space, but a world in which the bodiless existed and moved according to its own obscure laws or unpredictable impulses. The new picture illuminated with dreadful clarity certain general facts which had always bewildered and troubled him and from which he had tried to hide: the inevitability of hate and war, the diabolically timed mischances which wreck the best of human intentions, the walls of willful misunderstanding that divide one man from another, the eternal vitality of cruelty and ignorance and greed. They seemed appropriate now, necessary parts of the picture. And superstition only a kind of wisdom.

Then his thoughts returned to himself and the question he had asked Miss Millick, "What would such a thing want from a person? Sacrifices? Worship? Or just fear? What could you do to stop it from troubling you?" It had become a practical question.

With an explosive jangle, the phone began to ring. "Cate, I've been trying everywhere to get you," said his wife. "I never thought you'd be at the office. What are you doing? I've been worried."

He said something about work.

"You'll be home right away?" came the faint anxious question. "I'm a little frightened. Ronny just had a scare. It woke him up. He kept pointing to the window saying, 'Black man, black man.' Of course it's something he dreamed. But I'm frightened. You will be home? What's that, dear? Can't you hear me?"

"I will. Right away," he said. Then he was out of the office, buzzing the night bell and peering down the shaft.

He saw it peering up the shaft at him from the deep shadows three floors below, the sacking face pressed against the iron grille-work. It started up the stair at a shockingly swift, shambling gait, vanishing temporarily from sight as it swung into the second corridor below.

Catesby clawed at the door to the office, realized he had not locked it, pushed it in, slammed and locked it behind him, retreated to the other side of the room, cowered between the

filing cases and the wall. His teeth were clicking. He heard the groan of the rising cage. A silhouette darkened the frosted glass of the door, blotting out part of the grotesque reverse of the company name. After a little the door opened.

The big-globed overhead light flared on and, standing inside the door, her hand on the switch, was Miss Millick.

"Why, Mr. Wran," she stammered vacuously, "I didn't know you were here. I'd just come in to do some extra typing after the movie. I didn't . . . but the lights weren't on. What were you—"

He stared at her. He wanted to shout in relief, grab hold of her, talk rapidly He realized he was grinning hysterically

"Why, Mr. Wran, what's happened to you?" she asked embarrassedly, ending with a stupid titter. "Are you feeling sick? Isn't there something I can do for you?"

He shook his head jerkily and managed to say, "No, I'm just leaving. I was doing some extra work myself."

"But you *look* sick," she insisted, and walked over toward him. He inconsequentially realized she must have stepped in mud, for her high-heeled shoes left neat black prints.

"Yes, I'm sure you must be sick. You're so terribly pale." She sounded like an enthusiastic, incompetent nurse. Her face brightened with a sudden inspiration. "I've got something in my bag, that'll fix you up right away," she said. "It's for indigestion."

She fumbled at her stuffed oblong purse. He noticed that she was absent-mindedly holding it shut with one hand while she tried to open it with the other. Then, under his very eyes, he saw her bend back the thick prongs of metal locking the purse as if they were tinfoil, or as if her fingers had become a pair of steel pliers.

Instantly his memory recited the words he had spoken to Miss Millick that afternoon. "It couldn't hurt you physically at first . . . gradually get its hooks into the world . . might even get control of suitably vacuous minds. Then it could hurt whomever it wanted." A sickish, cold feeling grew inside him. He began to edge toward the door.

But Miss Millick hurried ahead of him.

"You don't have to wait, Fred," she called "Mr. Wran's decided to stay a while longer."

The door to the cage shut with a mechanical rattle. The cage creaked. Then she turned around in the door

"Why, Mr. Wran," she gurgled reproachfully, "I just couldn't

think of letting you go home now. I'm sure you're terribly unwell. Why, you might collapse in the street. You've just got to stay here until you feel different."

The creaking died away. He stood in the center of the office, motionless. His eyes traced the coal-black course of Miss Millick's footprints to where she stood blocking the door. Then a sound that was almost a scream was wrenched out of him, for it seemed to him that the blackness was creeping up her legs under the thin stockings.

"Why, Mr. Wran," she said, "you're acting as if you were crazy. You must lie down for a while. Here, I'll help you off with your coat."

The nauseously idiotic and rasping note was the same; only it had been intensified. As she came toward him he turned and ran through the storeroom, clattered a key desperately at the lock of the second door to the corridor.

"Why, Mr. Wran," he heard her call, "are you having some kind of a fit? You must let me help you."

The door came open and he plunged out into the corridor and up the stairs immediately ahead. It was only when he reached the top that he realized the heavy steel door in front of him led to the roof. He jerked up the catch.

"Why, Mr. Wran, you mustn't run away. I'm coming after you."

Then he was out on the gritty gravel of the roof. The night sky was clouded and murky, with a faint pinkish glow from the neon signs. From the distant mills rose a ghostly spurt of flame. He ran to the edge. The street lights glared dizzily upward. Two men were tiny round blobs of hat and shoulders. He swung around.

The thing was in the doorway. The voice was no longer solicitous but moronically playful, each sentence ending in a titter.

"Why, Mr. Wran, why have you come up here? We're all alone. Just think, I might push you off."

The thing came slowly toward him. He moved backward until his heels touched the low parapet. Without knowing why, or what he was going to do, he dropped to his knees. He dared not look at the face as it came nearer, a focus for the worst in the world, a gathering point for poisons from everywhere. Then the lucidity of terror took possession of his mind, and words formed on his lips.

"I will obey you. You are my god," he said. "You have supreme power over man and his animals and his machines. You

rule this city and all others I recognize that."

Again the titter, closer. "Why, Mr. Wran, you never talked like this before. Do you mean it?"

"The world is yours to do with as you will, save or tear to pieces," he answered fawningly, the words automatically fitting themselves together in vaguely liturgical patterns "I recognize that. I will praise, I will sacrifice. In smoke and soot I will worship you for ever."

The voice did not answer. He looked up. There was only Miss Millick, deathly pale and swaying drunkenly. Her eyes were closed. He caught her as she wobbled toward him. His knees gave way under the added weight and they sank down together on the edge of the roof.

After a while she began to twitch. Small noises came from her throat and her eyelids edged open.

"Come on, we'll go downstairs," he murmured jerkily, trying to draw her up. "You're feeling bad."

"I'm terribly dizzy," she whispered. "I must have fainted, I didn't eat enough. And then I'm so nervous lately, about the war and everything, I guess. Why, we're on the roof! Did you bring me up here to get some air? Or did I come up without knowing it? I'm awfully foolish. I used to walk in my sleep, my mother said."

As he helped her down the stairs, she turned and looked at him. "Why, Mr. Wran," she said, faintly, "you've got a big black smudge on your forehead. Here, let me get it off for you." Weakly she rubbed at it with her handkerchief. She started to sway again and he steadied her.

"No, I'll be all right," she said. "Only I feel cold What happened, Mr Wran? Did I have some sort of fainting spell?"

He told her it was something like that.

Later, riding home in the empty elevated car, he wondered how long he would be safe from the thing. It was a purely practical problem. He had no way of knowing, but instinct told him he had satisfied the brute for some time. Would it want more when it came again? Time enough to answer that question when it arose. It might be hard, he realized, to keep out of an insane asylum. With Helen and Ronny to protect, as well as himself, he would have to be careful and tightlipped. He began to speculate as to how many other men and women had seen the thing or things like it.

The elevated slowed and lurched in a familiar fashion. He looked at the roofs near the curve. They seemed very ordinary, as if what made them impressive had gone away for a while.

The Automatic Pistol

INKY KOZACS NEVER let anyone but himself handle his automatic pistol, or even touch it. It was blue-black and hefty and when you just pressed the trigger once, eight .45 caliber slugs came out of it almost on top of each other.

Inky was something of a mechanic, as far as his automatic went. He would break it down and put it together again, and every once in a while carefully rub a file across the inside trigger catch.

Glasses once told him, "You will make that gun into such a hair-trigger that it will go off in your pocket and blast off all your toes. You will only have to think about it and it will start shooting."

Inky smiled at that, I remember. He was a little wiry man with a pale face, from which he couldn't ever shave off the blue-black of his beard, no matter how close he shaved. His hair was black, too. He talked foreign, but I never could figure what country. He got together with Anton Larsen just after prohibition came, in the days when sea-skiffs with converted

automobile motors used to play tag with revenue cutters in New York Bay and off the Jersey coast, both omitting to use lights in order to make the game more difficult. Larsen and Inky Kozacs used to get their booze off a steamer and run it in near the Twin Lights in New Jersey.

It was there that Glasses and I started to work for them. Glasses, who looked like a cross between a college professor and an automobile salesman, came from I don't know where in New York City, and I was a local small-town policeman until I determined to lead a less hypocritical life. We used to ride the stuff back toward Newark in a truck.

Inky always rode in with us; Larsen only occasionally. Neither of them used to talk much; Larsen, because he didn't see any sense in talking unless to give a guy orders or a girl a proposition; and Inky, well, I guess because he wasn't any too happy talking American. And there wasn't a ride Inky took with us but he didn't slip out his automatic and sort of pet it and mutter at it under his breath. Once when we were restfully chugging down the highway Glasses asked him, polite but inquiring:

"Just what is it makes you so fond of that gun? After all, there must be thousands identically like it."

"You think so?" says Inky, giving us a quick stare from his little, glinty black eyes and making a speech for once. "Let me tell you, Glasses" (he made the word sound like 'Hlasses'), "nothing is alike in this world. People, guns, bottles of Scotch — nothing. Everything in the world is different. Every man has different fingerprints; and, of all guns made in the same factory as this one, there is not one like mine. I could pick mine out from a hundred. Yes, even if I hadn't filed the trigger catch, I could do that."

We didn't contradict him. It sounded pretty reasonable. He sure loved that gun, all right. He slept with it under his pillow. I don't think it ever got more than three feet away from him as long as he lived.

Once when Larsen was riding in with us, he remarked sarcastically, "That is a pretty little gun, Inky, but I am getting very tired of hearing you talk to it so much, especially when no one can understand what you are saying. Doesn't it ever talk back to you?"

Inky smiled at him. "My gun only knows eight words," he said, "and they are all alike."

This was such a good crack that we laughed.

"Let's have a look at it," said Larsen reaching out his hand.

But Inky put it back in his pocket and didn't take it out the rest of the trip.

After that Larsen was always kidding Inky about the gun, trying to get his goat. He was a persistent guy with a very peculiar sense of humor, and he kept it up for a long time after it had stopped being funny. Finally he took to acting as if he wanted to buy it, making Inky crazy offers of one to two hundred dollars.

"Two hundred and seventy-five dollars, Inky," he said one evening as we were rattling past Bayport with a load of cognac and Irish whiskey. "That's my last offer, and you better take it."

Inky shook his head and made a funny noise that was almost like a snarl. Then, to my great surprise (I almost ran the truck off the pavement) Larsen lost his temper.

"Hand over that damn gun!" he bellowed, grabbing Inky's shoulders and shaking him. I was almost knocked off the seat. Somebody might even have been hurt, if a motorcycle cop hadn't stopped us just at that moment to ask for his hush-money. By the time he was gone, Larsen and Inky were both cooled down to the freezing point, and there was no more fighting. We got our load safely into the warehouse, nobody saying a word.

Afterward, when Glasses and I were having a cup of coffee at a little open-all-night restaurant, I said, "Those two guys are crazy, and I don't like it a bit. Why the devil do they act that way, now that the business is going so swell? I haven't got the brains Larsen has, but you won't ever find me fighting about a gun as if I was a kid."

Glasses only smiled as he poured a precise half-spoonful of sugar into his cup.

"And Inky's as bad as he is," I went on. "I tell you, Glasses, it ain't natural or normal for a man to feel that way about a piece of metal. I can understand him being fond of it and feeling lost without it. I feel the same way about my lucky half-dollar It's the way he pets it and makes love to it that gets on my nerves. And now Larsen's acting the same way."

Glasses shrugged. "We're all getting a little jittery, although we won't admit it," he said. "Too many hijackers. And so we start getting on each other's nerves and fighting about trifles -- such as automatic pistols."

"You may have something there."

Glasses winked at me. "Why, certainly, No Nose," he said, referring to what had once been done to me with a baseball bat. "I even have another explanation of tonight's events."

"What?"

He leaned over and whispered in a mock-mysterious way, "Maybe there's something queer about the gun itself."

I told him in impolite language to go chase himself.

From that night, however, things were changed Larsen and Inky Kozacs never spoke to each other any more except in the line of business. And there was no more talk, kidding or serious, about the gun. Inky only brought it out when Larsen wasn't along.

Well, the years kept passing and the bootlegging business stayed good except that the hijackers became more numerous and Inky got a couple of chances to show us what a nice noise his automatic made. Then, too, we got into a row with some competitors bossed by an Irishman named Luke Dugan, and had to watch our step very carefully and change our route every other trip.

Still, business was good. I continued to support almost all my relatives, and Glasses put away a few dollars every month for what he called his Persian Cat Fund. Larsen, I believe, spent about everything he got on women and all that goes with them. He was the kind of guy who would take all the pleasures of life without cracking a smile, but who lived for them just the same.

As for Inky Kozacs, we never knew what happened to the money he made. We never heard of him spending much, so we finally figured he must be saving it -probably in bills in a safety deposit box. Maybe he was planning to go back to the Old Country, wherever that was, and be somebody. At any rate he never told us. By the time Congress took our profession away from us, he must have had a whale of a lot of dough. We hadn't had a big racket, but we'd been very careful.

Finally we ran our last load. We'd have had to quit the business pretty soon anyway, because the big syndicates were demanding more protection money each week. There was no chance left for a small independent operator, even if he was as clever as Larsen. So Glasses and I took a couple of months off for vacation before thinking what to do next for his Persian cats and my shiftless relatives. For the time being we stuck together.

Then one morning I read in the paper that Inky Kozacs had

been taken for a ride. He'd been found shot dead on a dump heap near Elizabeth, New Jersey.

"I guess Luke Dugan finally got him," said Glasses.

"A nasty break," I said, "especially figuring all that money he hadn't got any fun out of. I am glad that you and I, Glasses, aren't important enough for Dugan to bother about, I hope."

"Yeah. Say, No Nose, does it say if they found Inky's gun on him?"

I said it told that the dead man was unarmed and that no weapon was found on the scene.

Glasses remarked that it was queer to think of Inky's gun being in anyone else's pocket. I agreed, and we spent some time wondering whether Inky had had a chance to defend himself.

About two hours later Larsen called and told us to meet him at the hide-out. He said Luke Dugan was gunning for him too.

The hide-out is a three-room frame bungalow with a big corrugated iron garage next to it. The garage was for the truck, and sometimes we would store a load of booze there when we heard that the police were going to make some arrests for the sake of variety. It is near Bayport, about a mile and a half from the cement highway and about a quarter of a mile from the bay and the little inlet in which we used to hide our boat. Stiff, knife-edged sea-grass taller than a man, comes up near to the house on the bay side, which is north, and on the west too. Under the sea-grass the ground is marshy, though in hot weather and when the tides aren't high, it gets dry and caked; here and there creeks of tidewater go through it. Even a little breeze will make the blades of sea-grass scrape each other with a funny dry sound.

To the east are some fields, and beyond them, Bayport. Bayport is a kind of summer resort town and some of the houses are built up on poles because of the tides and storms. It has a little lagoon for the boats of the fishermen who go out after crabs.

To the south of the hide-out is the dirt road leading to the cement highway. The nearest house is about half a mile away.

It was late in the afternoon when Glasses and I got there. We brought groceries for a couple of days, figuring Larsen might want to stay. Then, along about sunset, we heard Larsen's coupe turning in, and I went out to put it in the big empty garage and carry in his suitcase. When I got back Larsen was talking to Glasses. He was a big man and his shoulders were broad both ways, like a wrestler's. His head was almost bald and what was

left of his hair was a dirty yellow. His eyes were little and his face wasn't given much to expression. And that was the way it was when he said, "Yeah, Inky got it."

"Luke Dugan's crazy gunmen sure hold a grudge," I observed.

Larsen nodded his head and scowled.

"Inky got it," he repeated, taking up his suitcase and starting for the bedroom. "And I'm planning to stay here for a few days, just in case they're after me too. I want you and Glasses to stay here with me."

Glasses gave me a funny wink and began throwing a meal together. I turned on the lights and pulled down the blinds, taking a worried glance down the road, which was empty. This waiting around in a lonely house for a bunch of gunmen to catch up with you didn't appeal to me. Nor to Glasses either, I guessed. It seemed to me that it would have been a lot more sensible for Larsen to put a couple of thousand miles between him and New York. But, knowing Larsen, I had sense enough not to make any comments.

After canned corned-beef hash and beans and beer, we sat around the table drinking coffee.

Larsen took an automatic out of his pocket and began fooling with it, and right away I saw it was Inky's. For about five minutes nobody said a word. Glasses played with his coffee, pouring in the cream one drop at a time. I wadded a piece of bread into little pellets which kept looking less and less appetizing.

Finally Larsen looked up at us and said, "Too bad Inky didn't have this with him when he was taken for a ride. He gave it to me just before he planned sailing for the Old Country. He didn't want it with him any more, now that the racket's over."

"I'm glad the guy that killed him hasn't got it now," said Glasses quickly. He talked nervously and in his worst college professor style. I could tell he didn't want the silence to settle down again. "It's a funny thing, Inky giving up his gun but I can understand his feeling; he mentally associated the gun with our racket; when the one was over he didn't care about the other."

Larsen grunted, which meant for Glasses to shut up

"What's going to happen to Inky's dough?" I asked.

Larsen shrugged his shoulders and went on fooling with the automatic, throwing a shell into the chamber, cocking it, and so

forth. It reminded me so much of the way Inky used to handle it that I got fidgetting and began to imagine I heard Luke Dugan's gunmen creeping up through the sea-grass. Finally I got up and started to walk around.

It was then that the accident happened. Larsen, after cocking the gun, was bringing up his thumb to let the hammer down easy, when it slipped out of his hand. As it hit the floor it went off with a flash and a bang, sending a slug gouging the floor too near my foot for comfort.

As soon as I realized I wasn't hit, I yelled without thinking, "I always told Inky he was putting too much of a hair trigger on his gun! The crazy fool!"

Larsen sat with his pig eyes staring down at the gun where it lay between his feet. Then he gave a funny little snort, picked it up and put it on the table.

"That gun ought to be thrown away. It's too dangerous to handle. It's bad luck," I said to Larsen and then wished I hadn't, for he gave me the benefit of a dirty look and some fancy Swedish swearing.

"Shut up, No Nose," he finished, "and don't tell me what I can do and what I can't. I can take care of you, and I can take care of Inky's gun. Right now I'm going to bed."

He shut the bedroom door behind him, leaving it up to me and Glasses to guess that we were supposed to take out our blankets and sleep on the floor.

But we didn't want to go to sleep right away, if only because we were still thinking about Luke Dugan. So we got out a deck of cards and started a game of stud poker, speaking very low. Stud poker is like the ordinary kind, except that four of the five cards are dealt face up and one at a time.

You bet each time a card is dealt, and so considerable money is apt to change hands, even when you're playing with a ten-cent limit, like we were. It's a pretty good game for taking money away from suckers, and Glasses and I used to play it by the hour when we had nothing better to do. But since we were both equally smart, neither one of us won consistently.

It was very quiet, except for Larsen's snoring and the rustling of the sea-grass and the occasional chink of a dime.

After about an hour, Glasses happened to look down at Inky's automatic lying on the other side of the table, and something about the way his body twisted around sudden made me look too. Right away I felt something was wrong, but I

couldn't tell what; it gave me a funny feeling in the back of the neck. Then Glasses put out two thin fingers and turned the gun halfway around, and I realized what had been wrong—or what I thought had been wrong. When Larsen had put the gun down, I thought it had been pointing at the outside door; but when Glasses and I looked at it, it was pointing more in the direction of the bedroom door. When you have the fidgets your memory gets tricky.

A half-hour later we noticed the gun again pointing toward the bedroom door. This time Glasses spun it around quick, and I got the fidgets for fair. Glasses gave a low whistle and got up, and tried putting the gun on different parts of the table and jiggling the table to see if the gun would move.

"I see what happened now," he whispered finally. "When the gun is lying on its side, it sort of balances on its safety catch.

"Now this little table has got a wobble to it and when we are playing cards the wobble is persistent enough to edge the gun slowly around in a circle."

"I don't care about that," I whispered back. "I don't want to be shot in my sleep just because the table has a persistent wobble. I think the rumble of a train two miles away would be enough to set off that crazy hair-trigger. Give me it."

Glasses handed it over and, taking care always to point it at the floor, I unloaded it, put it back on the table, and put the bullets in my coat pocket. Then we tried to go on with our card game.

"My red bullet bets ten cents," I said, referring to my ace of hearts.

"My king raises you ten cents," responded Glasses.

But it was no use. Between Inky's automatic and Luke Dugan I couldn't concentrate on my cards.

"Do you remember, Glasses," I said, "the evening you said there was maybe something queer about Inky's gun?"

"I do a lot of talking, No Nose, and not much of it is worth remembering. We'd better stick to our cards. My pair of sevens bets a nickel."

I followed his advice, but didn't have much luck, and lost five or six dollars. By two o'clock we were both pretty tired and not feeling quite so jittery; so we got the blankets and wrapped up in them and tried to grab a little sleep. I listened to the sea-grass and the tooting of a locomotive about two miles away, and worried some over the possible activities of Luke Dugan, but finally dropped off.

It must have been about sunrise that the clicking noise woke me up. There was a faint, greenish light coming in through the shades. I lay still, not knowing exactly what I was listening for, but so on edge that it didn't occur to me how prickly hot I was from sleeping without sheets, or how itchy my face and hands were from mosquito bites. Then I heard it again, and it sounded like nothing but the sharp click the hammer of a gun makes when it snaps down on an empty chamber. Twice I heard it. It seemed to be coming from the inside of the room. I slid out of my blankets and rustled Glasses awake.

"It's that damned automatic of Inky's," I whispered shakily. "It's trying to shoot itself."

When a person wakes up sudden and before he should, he's apt to feel just like I did and say crazy things without thinking. Glasses looked at me for a moment, then he rubbed his eyes and smiled. I could hardly see the smile in the dim light, but I could feel it in his voice when he said, "No Nose, you are getting positively psychic."

"I tell you I'd swear to it," I insisted. "It was the click of the hammer of a gun."

Glasses yawned. "Next you will be telling me that the gun was Inky's familiar."

"Familiar what?" I asked him, scratching my head and beginning to get mad. There are times when Glasses' college professor stuff gets me down.

"No Nose," he continued, "have you ever heard of witches?"

I was walking around to the windows and glancing out from behind the blinds to make sure there was no one around. I didn't see anyone. For that matter, I didn't really expect to.

"What do you mean?" I said. "Sure I have. Why, I knew a guy, a Pennsylvania Dutchman, and he told me about witches putting what he called hexes on people. He said his uncle had a hex put on him and he died afterward. He was a traveling salesman—the Dutchman that told me, I mean."

Glasses nodded his head, and then went on, sleepy-like, from the floor, "Well, No Nose, the Devil used to give each witch a pet black cat or dog or maybe a toad to follow it around and protect it and revenge injuries. Those little creatures were called familiars—stooges sent out by the Big Boy to watch over his chosen, you might say. The witches used to talk to them in a language no one else could understand. Now this is what I'm getting at. Times change and styles change—and the style in

familiars along with them. Inky's gun is black, isn't it? And he used to mutter at it in a language we couldn't understand, didn't he? And—"

"You're crazy," I told him, not wanting to be kidded.

"Why, No Nose," he said, "you were telling me yourself just now that you thought the gun had a life of its own, that it could cock itself and shoot itself without any human assistance. Weren't you?"

"You're crazy," I repeated, feeling like an awful fool and wishing I hadn't waked Glasses up. "See, the gun's here where I left it on the table, and the bullets are still in my pocket."

"Luckily," he said in a stagy voice he tried to make sound like an undertaker's. "Well, now that you've called me early, I shall wander off and avail us of our neighbor's newspaper. Meanwhile you may run my bath."

I waited until I was sure he was gone, because I didn't want him to make a fool of me again. Then I went over and examined the gun. First I looked for the trade mark or the name of the maker. I found a place which had been filed down, where it might have been once, but that was all. Before this I would have sworn I could have told the make, but now I couldn't. Not that in general it didn't look like an ordinary automatic; it was the details—the grip, the trigger guard, the safety catch—that were unfamiliar. I figured it was some foreign make I'd never happened to see before.

After I'd been handling it for about two minutes I began to notice something queer about the feel of the metal. As far as I could see it was just ordinary blued steel, but somehow it was too smooth and slick and made me want to keep stroking the barrel back and forth I can't explain it any better; the metal just didn't seem *right* to me. Finally I realized the gun was getting on my nerves and making me imagine things; so I put it down on the mantel.

When Glasses got back, the sun was up and he wasn't smiling any more. He shoved a newspaper on my lap and pointed. It was open to page five. I read:

ANTON LARSEN SOUGHT
IN KOZACS KILLING
Police Believe
Ex-Bootlegger
Slain by Pal

I looked up to see Larsen standing in the bedroom door. He was in his pajama trousers and looked yellow and seedy, his eyelids puffed and his pig eyes staring at us.

"Good morning, boss," said Glasses slowly. "We just noticed in the paper that they are trying to do you a dirty trick. They're claiming you, not Dugan, had Inky shot."

Larsen grunted, came over and took the paper, looked at it quickly, grunted again, and went to the sink to splash some cold water on his face.

"So," he said, turning to us. "All the better we are here at the hideout."

That day was the longest and most nervous I've ever gone through. Somehow Larsen didn't seem to be completely waked up. If he'd been a stranger I'd have diagnosed it as a laudanum jag. He sat around in his pajama trousers, so that by noon he still looked as if he'd only that minute rolled out of bed. The worst thing was that he wouldn't talk or tell us anything about his plans. Of course he never did much talking, but this time there was a difference. His funny pig eyes began to give me the jim-jams; no matter how still he sat they were always moving—like a guy having a laudanum nightmare and about to run amuck.

Finally it started to get on Glasses' nerves, which surprised me, for Glasses usually knows how to take things quietly. He began by making little suggestions—that we should get a later paper, that we should call up a certain lawyer in New York, that I should get my cousin Jake to mosey around the police station at Bayport and see if anything was up, and so on. Each time Larsen shut him up quick.

Once I thought he was going to take a crack at Glasses. And Glasses, like a fool, kept on pestering. I could see a blow-up coming, plain as the absence of my nose. I couldn't figure what was making Glasses do it. I guess when the college professor type gets the jim-jams they get them worse than a dummy like me. They've got trained brains which they can't stop from pecking away at ideas, and that's a disadvantage.

As for me, I tried to keep hold of my nerves. I kept saying to myself, "Larsen is O.K. He's just a little on edge. We all are. Why, I've known him ten years. He's O.K." I only half realized I was saying those things because I was beginning to believe that Larsen wasn't O.K.

The blow-up came at about two o'clock. Larsen's eyes opened wide, as if he'd just remembered something, and he

jumped up so quick that I started to look around for Luke Dugan's firing-squad —or the police. But it wasn't either of those. Larsen had spotted the automatic on the mantel. Right away as he began fingering it, he noticed it was unloaded.

"Who monkeyed with this?" he asked in a very nasty, thick voice. "And why?"

Glasses couldn't keep quiet.

"I thought you might hurt yourself with it," he said.

Larsen walked over to him and slapped him on the side of the face, knocking him down. I took firm hold of the chair I had been sitting on, ready to use it like a club. Glasses twisted on the floor for a moment, until he got control of the pain. Then he looked up, tears beginning to drip out of his left eye where he had been hit. He had sense enough not to say anything, or to smile. Some fools would have smiled in such a situation, thinking it showed courage. It would have showed courage, I admit, but not good sense.

After about twenty seconds Larsen decided not to kick him in the face.

"Well, are you going to keep your mouth shut?" he asked.

Glasses nodded. I let go my grip on the chair.

"Where's the load?" asked Larsen.

I took the bullets out of my pocket and put them on the table, moving deliberately.

Larsen reloaded the gun. It made me sick to see his big hands sliding along the blue-black metal, because I remembered the feel of it.

"Nobody touches this but me, see?" he said.

And with that he walked into the bedroom and closed the door.

All I could think of was, "Glasses was right when he said that Larsen was crazy on the subject of Inky's automatic. And it's just the same as it was with Inky. He has to have the gun close to him. That's what was bothering him all morning, only he didn't know."

Then I kneeled down by Glasses, who was still lying on the floor, propped up on his elbows looking at the bedroom door. The mark of Larsen's hand was brick-red on the side of his face, with a little trickle of blood on the cheekbone, where the skin was broken.

I whispered, very low, just what I thought of Larsen. "Let's beat it first chance and get the police on him," I finished.

Glasses shook his head a little. He kept staring at the door, his left eye blinking spasmodically. Then he shivered, and gave a funny grunt deep down in his throat.

"I can't believe it," he said.

"He killed Inky," I whispered in his ear. "I'm almost sure of it. And he was within an inch of killing you."

"I don't mean that," said Glasses.

"What do you mean then?"

Glasses shook his head, as if he were trying to change the subject of his thoughts.

"Something I saw," he said, "or, rather, something I realized."

"The gun?" I questioned. My lips were dry and it was hard for me to say the word.

He gave me a funny look and got up.

"We'd better both be sensible from now on," he said, and then added in a whisper. "We can't do anything now. Maybe we'll get a chance tonight."

After a long while Larsen called to me to heat some water so he could shave. I brought it to him, and by the time I was frying hash he came out and sat down at the table. He was all washed and shaved, and the straggling patches of hair around his bald head were brushed smooth. He was dressed and had his hat on. But in spite of everything he still had that yellow, seedy, laudanum-jag look. We ate our hash and beans and drank our beer, no one talking. It was dark now, and a tiny wind was making the blades of sea-grass whine.

Finally Larsen got up and walked around the table once and said, "Let's have a game of stud poker."

While I was clearing off the dishes he brought out his suitcase and planked it down on the side table. He took Inky's automatic out of his pocket and looked at it a second. Then he laid the automatic in the suitcase, and shut it up and strapped it tight.

"We're leaving after the game," he said.

I wasn't quite sure whether to feel relieved or not.

We played with a ten-cent limit, and right from the start Larsen began to win. It was a queer game, what with me feeling so jittery, and Glasses sitting there with the left side of his face all swollen, squinting through the right lens of his spectacles because the left lens had been cracked when Larsen hit him, and Larsen all dressed up as if he were sitting in a station waiting for a train. The shades were all down and the hanging light bulb,

which was shaded with a foolscap of newspaper, threw a bright circle of light on the table, but left the rest of the room too dark to please me.

It was after Larsen had won about five dollars from each of us that I began hearing the noise. At first I couldn't be sure, because it was very low and because of the dry whining of the sea-grass, but right from the first it bothered me.

Larsen turned up a king and raked in another pot.

"You can't lose tonight," observed Glasses, smiling and winced because the smile hurt his cheek.

Larsen scowled. He didn't seem pleased at his luck, or at Glasses' remark. His pig eyes were moving in the same way that had given us the jim-jams earlier in the day. And I kept thinking, "Maybe he killed Inky Kozacs. Glasses and me are just small fry to him. Maybe he's trying to figure out whether to kill us too. Or maybe he's got a use for us, and he's wondering how much to tell us. If he starts anything I'll shove the table over on him; that is, if I get the chance." He was beginning to look like a stranger to me, although I'd known him for ten years and he'd been my boss and paid me good money.

Then I heard the noise again, a little plainer this time. It was very peculiar and hard to describe—something like the noise a rat would make if it were tied up in a lot of blankets and trying to work its way out. I looked up and saw that the bruise on Glasses' left cheek stood out plainer.

"My black bullet bets ten cents," said Larsen, pushing a dime into the pot.

"I'm with you," I answered, shoving in two nickels. My voice sounded so dry and choked it startled me.

Glasses put in his money and dealt another card to each of us.

Then *I* felt my face going pale, for it seemed to me that the noise was coming from Larsen's suitcase, and I remembered that he had put Inky's automatic into the suitcase with its muzzle pointing *away* from us.

The noise was louder now. Glasses couldn't bear to sit still without saying anything. He pushed back his chair and started to whisper, "I think I hear—"

Then he saw the crazy, murderous look that came into Larsen's eyes, and he had sense enough to finish, "I think I hear the eleven o'clock train."

"Sit still," said Larsen, "very still. It's only ten forty-five. My ace bets another ten cents."

"I'll raise you," I croaked.

I wanted to jump up. I wanted to throw Larsen's suitcase out the door. I wanted to run out myself. Yet I sat tight. We all sat tight. We didn't dare make a move, for if we had, it would have shown that we believed the impossible was happening. And if a man does that he's crazy. I kept rubbing my tongue against my lips, without wetting them.

I stared at the cards, trying to shut out everything else. The hand was all dealt now. I had a jack and some little ones, and I knew my face-down card was a jack. Glasses had a king showing. Larsen's ace of clubs was the highest card on the board.

And still the sound kept coming. Something twisting, straining, heaving. A muffled sound.

"And I raise *you* ten cents," said Glasses loudly. I got the idea he did it just to make a noise, not because he thought his cards were especially good.

I turned to Larsen, trying to pretend I was interested in whether he would raise or stop betting. His eyes had stopped moving and were staring straight ahead at the suitcase. His mouth was twisted in a funny, set way. After a while his lips began to move. His voice was so low I could barely catch the words.

"Ten cents more. *I killed Inky, you know.* What does your jack say, No Nose?"

"It raises you," I said automatically.

His reply came in the same almost inaudible voice. "You haven't a chance of winning, No Nose. *He didn't bring the money with him, like he said he would. But I made him tell me where he hid it in his room. I can't pull the job myself; the cops would recognize me. But you two ought to be able to do it for me. That's why we're going to New York tonight.* I raise you ten cents more."

"I'll see you," I heard myself saying.

The noise stopped, not gradually but all of a sudden. Right away I wanted ten times worse to jump up and do something. But I was stuck to my chair.

Larsen turned up the ace of spades.

"Two aces. *Inky's little gun didn't protect him, you know. He didn't have a chance to use it.* Clubs and spades. Black bullets. I win."

Then it happened.

I don't need to tell you much about what we did afterward.

We buried the body in the sea-grass. We cleaned everything up and drove the coupe a couple of miles inland before abandoning it. We carried the gun away with us and took it apart and hammered it out of shape and threw it into the bay part by part. We never found out anything more about Inky's money or tried to. The police never bothered us. We counted ourselves lucky that we had enough sense left to get away safely, after what happened.

For, with smoke and flame squirting through the little round holes, and the whole suitcase jerking and shaking with the recoils, eight slugs drummed out and almost cut Anton Larsen in two.

The Inheritance

"THIS THE ROOM?" I put down my cardboard suitcase.

The landlord nodded. "Nothing been changed in it since your uncle died."

It was small and dingy, but pretty clean. I took it in. The oak dresser. The cupboard. The bare table, The green-shaded drop light. The easy chair. The kitchen chair. The cast-iron bed.

"Except the sheets and stuff," the landlord added. "They been washed."

"He died unexpectedly, didn't he?" I said.

"Yeah. In his sleep. You know, his heart."

I nodded vaguely, and, on an impulse, walked over and opened the cupboard door. Two of the shelves were filled with canned stuff and other supplies. There was an old coffee pot and two saucepans, and some worn china covered with a fine network of brownish cracks.

"Your uncle had cooking privileges," the landlord said. "Of course you can have them too, if you want."

I went over and looked down three stories at the dirty street.

Some boys were pitching pennies. I studied the names of the stores. When I turned around I thought maybe the landlord would be going, but he was still watching me. The whites of his eyes were discolored.

"There's twenty-five cents for the washing I told you about," he said. I dug in my pocket for a quarter. That left me forty-seven cents.

He laboriously wrote me a receipt "There's your key on the table," he said, "and one for the outside door The place is yours for the next three months and two weeks."

He walked out, shutting the door behind him. From below came the rackety surge of a passing street car. I dropped down into the easy chair.

People can inherit some pretty queer things. I had inherited some canned goods and the rent of a room, just because my Uncle David, whom I never remembered seeing, paid for things in advance. The court had been decent about it, especially after my telling them I was broke. The landlord had refused to make a refund, but you could hardly blame him for that. Of course, after hitch-hiking all the way to the city, I'd been disappointed to hear there was no real money involved. The pension had stopped with my uncle's death, and funeral expenses had eaten up the rest. Still, I was thankful I had a place to sleep.

They said my uncle must have made his will just a little while after I was born. I don't think my father and mother knew about it, or they'd have mentioned it -at least when they died. I never heard much about him except that he was my father's elder brother.

I vaguely knew he was a policeman, that was all You know how it is, families split up, and only the old folks keep touch, and they don't talk to the young folks about it, and pretty soon the whole connection is forgotten, unless something special happens. I guess that sort of thing has been going on since the world began. Forces are at work that break up people, and scatter them, and make them lonely. You feel it most of all in a big city.

They say there's no law against being a failure, but there is, as I've found out After a childhood in easy circumstances, things got harder and harder. The Depression. Family dying. Friends going off Jobs uncertain and difficult to find. Delays and uncomfortableness about government assistance. I'd tried my hand at bumming around, but found I lacked the right

temperament. Even being a tramp or sponger or scavenger takes special ability. Hitch-hiking to the city had left me feeling nervous and unwell. And my feet hurt. I'm one of those people who aren't much good at taking it.

Sitting there in my dead uncle's worn, old easy chair with the night coming on, I felt the full impact of my loneliness. Through the walls I heard people moving around and talking faintly, but they weren't people I knew or had ever seen. From outside came a mixed-up rumbling and murmuring. Far away I could hear a steam-engine grunting heavily; nearer, the monotonous buzz of a defective neon sign. There was a steady thumping from some machinery I couldn't identify, and I thought I heard the whine of a sewing machine. Lonely unfriendly sounds, all of them. The dusty square of window kept getting darker, but it was more like heavy smoke settling than a regular evening.

Some trivial thing was bothering me Something unconnected with the general gloominess. I tried to figure out what it was, and after a while it came to me suddenly. It was very simple. Although I usually slump to one side when I sit in an easy chair, I was now leaning straight back, because the upholstery was deeply indented toward the center. And that, as I immediately realized, must have been because my uncle had always leaned straight back. The sensation was a little frightening, but I resisted the impulse to jump up. Instead I found myself wondering what sort of man he'd been and how he'd lived, and I began to picture him moving around and sitting down and sleeping in the bed, and occasionally having some friend from the police force to visit with him. I wondered how he passed the time after he was retired.

There weren't any books in sight. I didn't notice any ashtrays, and there wasn't a tobacco smell. It had probably been pretty lonely for the old man, without family or anything. And here I was inheriting his loneliness.

Then I did get up, and started to walk around aimlessly. It struck me that the furniture looked sort of uncomfortable all stuck back against the walls, so I pulled some of it out. I went over to the dresser. There was a framed picture on it, lying face down. I took it over to the window. Yes, it was my uncle, all right, for "David Rhode, Lieutenant of Police, retired July 1, 1927," was inscribed on it in small, careful handwriting. He had on his policeman's cap, and his cheeks were thin, and his eyes were more intelligent and penetrating than I'd expected. He

didn't look so old. I put it back on the dresser and then changed my mind and propped it up on top of the cupboard. I still felt too nervous and sickish to want anything to eat. I knew I should have gone to bed and tried to get a good rest, but I was on edge after the day at court. I was lonely, yet I didn't want to take a walk or be near people.

So I decided to put in some time looking through my inheritance in detail. It was the obvious thing to do, but a sort of embarrassment had been holding me back. Once I started, I became quite curious. I didn't expect to find anything of value. I was mostly interested in learning more about my uncle. I began by taking another look at the cupboard. There was canned stuff and coffee enough for maybe a month. That was fortunate. It would give me time to rest up and hunt for a job. On the bottom shelf were a few old tools, screws, wire and other junk.

When I opened the closet door I got a momentary shock. Hanging against the wall was a policeman's uniform, with a blue cap on the hook above and two heavy shoes jutting out underneath, and a night stick hung alongside on a nail. It looked lifelike in the shadows. I realized it was getting dark and switched on the green-shaded drop light. I found a regular suit and an overcoat and some other clothes in the closet—not many. On the shelf was a box containing a service revolver and a belt with some cartridges stuck in the leather loops. I wondered if I ought to do anything about it. I was puzzled by the uniform, until I realized he must have had two, one for summer, the other for winter. They had buried him in the other.

This far I hadn't found much, so I started on the dresser. The two top drawers contained shirts and handkerchiefs and socks and underwear, all washed and neatly folded but frayed. They were mine now. If they fitted me, I had a right to wear them. It was an unpleasant thought, but practical.

The third drawer was filled with newspaper clippings, carefully arranged into separate piles and bundles. I glanced at the top ones. They all seemed to be concerned with police cases, two of them fairly recent. Here, I figured, was a clue to what my uncle did after his retirement. He kept up an interest in his old job.

The bottom drawer contained a heterogeneous assortment of stuff. A pair of spectacles, a curiously short, silver-headed cane, an empty briefcase, some green ribbon, a toy wooden horse that looked very old (I wondered idly, if he had bought it for me when

I was a baby and then forgotten to send it) and other things.

Quickly I shoved in the drawer and walked away. This business wasn't as interesting as I'd expected. I got a picture of things all right, but it made me think of death and feel shivery and lost. Here I was in the midst of a big city, and the only person I felt at all close to was three weeks buried.

Still, I figured I'd better finish the job, so I pulled out the shallow drawer under the table top. I found two recent newspapers, a pair of scissors and a pencil, a small bundle of receipts in the landlord's laborious hand, and a detective story from a lending library. It was called, "The Lodger." Would they want me to pay the rental on it? I guessed they would not insist.

That was all I could find. And, as I thought it over, it seemed very little. Didn't he use to get any letters? The general neatness had led me to expect a couple of boxes of them, carefully tied in packets. And weren't there any photographs or other mementos? Or magazines, or notebooks? Why, I hadn't even come across that jumble of advertisements and folders and cards and other worthless stuff you find somewhere in almost every home. It suddenly struck me that his last years must have been awfully empty and barren, in spite of the clippings and the detective story.

There wasn't any knock, but the door opened and the landlord stepped inside, moving softly in big, loose slippers. It startled me and made me a trifle angry a jumpy sort of anger.

"I just wanted to tell you," he said, "that we don't like to have any noise after eleven o'clock. Oh, and your uncle used to cook at eight-thirty and five."

"Okay, okay," I said quickly and was about to add something sarcastic when a thought struck me.

"Did my uncle keep a trunk or box in the basement, or anything like that?" I asked.

He looked at me stupidly for a moment, then shook his head. "No. Everything he had is right here," and he indicated the room with a sidewise movement of his big, thick-fingered hand.

"Did he have many visitors?" I asked. I thought the landlord hadn't heard this question but after a while he came to and shook his head.

"Thank you," I said, moving off. "Good-night."

When I turned back he was still standing in the doorway, staring sleepily around the room. Again I noticed how the whites of his eyes were discolored.

"Say," he remarked, "I see you've moved the furniture back the way your uncle had it."

"Yes, it was all up against the walls, and I pulled it out."

"You put his picture back on the top of the cupboard."

"That's where it used to be?" I asked. He nodded, looked around again, yawned and turned to go.

"Well—" he said, "sleep well."

The last two words sounded unnatural, as if dragged out with prodigious effort. He closed the door noiselessly behind him. Immediately I had snatched the key from the table and was locking it. I wasn't going to stand for him prying around without knocking, not if I could help it. Again loneliness closed in on me.

So I had rearranged the furniture in the old pattern, and put the picture back in its proper place, had I? The thought frightened me a little. I wished I didn't have to sleep in that ugly cast-iron bed. But where else could I go with forty-seven cents and my lack of gumption?

I realized suddenly that I was being foolish. It was perfectly natural that I should feel a little uneasy. Anyone would in such queer circumstances. But I mustn't let it get me down I would have to live in this room for some time. The thing to do was to get used to it So I got out some of the newspaper clippings that were in the dresser and began to go through them. They covered a period of twenty years or so. The older ones were yellow and stiff and cracked easily. They were mostly about murders. I kept turning them over, looking at the headlines and here and there reading a little. After a while I found myself plunged into accounts of a "Phantom Slayer" who killed wantonly and for no apparent motive. His crimes were similar to those with which the uncaught "Jack the Ripper" horrified London in 1888, except that men and children, as well as women, were numbered among his victims I vaguely remembered hearing about two of the cases years ago there were seven or eight altogether. Now I read the details. They were not conducive to pleasant thought. My uncle's name was mentioned among the investigators in some of the earlier cases.

That was by far the biggest pile of clippings. All the piles were carefully arranged. but I couldn't find any notes of comments, except a tiny scrap of paper with an address on it, 2318 Robey Street. It puzzled me. Just that solitary address without any explanation I planned to look it up some day.

It was night outside now, and the upward-slanting light from

the street lamp made it easier to see the dust on the windowpane. There weren't many new noises coming through the walls, just the low, sharp drone of some radio voices. I could still hear the buzz of the defective neon sign, and another engine was puffing in the distant yards. To my relief, I found I was getting sleepy. As I undressed and hung my clothes with uncustomary neatness on the kitchen chair, I found myself wondering if my uncle had arranged his in the same way: coat over the back, trousers over the seat, shoes underneath with the socks tucked inside them, shirt and tie draped on top of the coat.

I opened the window three inches from the top and bottom, then remembered that I seldom opened my bedroom window from the top, and did some more of the same wondering. I was thankful I still felt sleepy. I pulled back the covers of the bed, switched off the drop light, and jumped in.

My first thought was, "Here his head lay." I wondered if he died in his sleep like they told me, or if he waked paralyzed, an old man alone in the dark. That wouldn't do, I told myself, and tried to think how tired and tense my muscles were, how good it was to rest my feet and be able to stretch and relax. That helped a little. As my eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness, I noted the dim outlines of the objects in the room. The chair piled with my clothes. The table. A queer little highlight reflected from my uncle's picture on top of the cupboard. The walls seemed to press in close.

Gradually my imagination went to work picturing the great city beyond the walls, the city I hardly knew. I visualized block after block of dingy buildings, with here and there clusters of higher structures, where the stores and the street-car lines lay. The great looming masses of warehouses and factories. The dismal expanse of track and cinders in the railroad yards, with the rank and file of empty cars. Lightless alleys, and the nervous surge of traffic along infrequent boulevards. Row after row of ugly two story frame houses, crowded close together. Human forms that, in my imagination, never walked upright, but slunk through the shadows close to the walls. Criminals. Murderers.

Abruptly I broke off this train of thought, a little frightened at its vividness. It was almost as if my mind had been outside my body, spying and peering. I tried to laugh at the idea, so obviously a result of my tiredness and tension. No matter how alien the city seemed, I was safe in my little room with the door locked. A policeman's room. David Rhode, Lieutenant of

Police, retired July 1, 1927. I dozed and fell asleep.

My dream was simple, vivid, and singularly realistic. I seemed to be standing in a cobblestoned alley. There was an unpainted fence with a board fallen from it, and beyond it the dark brick wall of an apartment building with outjutting back porches of wooden framework painted gray. It was the hour of dawn, when life is at low ebb and sleep clings everywhere like a chilly mist. Formless clouds hid the sky. I could see a yellow shade flapping out of a window on the first floor yet I couldn't hear the sound. That was all. But the feeling of cold fear that got hold of me was difficult to describe. I seemed to be looking for something and yet afraid to move.

The scene changed, although my emotions remained the same. It was night, and an empty lot, with a great billboard shutting off the harsh light of the street lamp from most of it. Dimly I could see the things in the lot: a pile of bricks and old bottles, some broken barrels, and the stripped wrecks of two automobiles, their fenders rusted and broken. Weeds and rank grass grew in sprawling clumps. Then I noticed there was a narrow, bumpy path crossing the lot diagonally and along it a little boy was moving slowly, as if he had come back to look for something he had lost earlier in the evening. The horror brooding over the place was directed at him, and I felt terribly afraid for him. I tried to warn him, to shout and tell him to run home. But I could not speak or move.

Again the scene changed. Again it was the hour of dawn. I was standing in front of a two-story stucco house, set back a little from the street. There was a neat lawn and two flower beds. A block away I could see a policeman slowly walking his beat. Then a force seemed to take hold of me and move me toward the house. I saw a cement walk and a coil of hose and then, in a kind of little nook or recess, a huddled form. The force bent me down toward it and I saw that it was a young woman, her skull beaten in and her face splotched with blood. I struggled and tried to cry out, and I made a great effort and came awake.

For what seemed a long time I lay tense and afraid to move, feeling my heart pounding. The dim room swam around me, and figures moved about, and for a while the window wasn't where it should be. Gradually I got control of my panic and forced things to return to their normal forms, by looking at them closely. Then I sat up, still shivering. It was one of the worst nightmares I could remember having. I reached for a cigarette and lit it

shakily, and pulled the bedclothes around me.

Suddenly I remembered something. That stucco house, I'd seen it before, very recently, and I thought I knew where. I got out of bed, switched on the light, and rifled through the newspaper clippings. I found the photographs, all right. The house was the same as the one in my dream. I read the caption. "Where Girl Victim of Phantom Slayer was Found." So that was what had caused my nightmare. I might have known it.

I thought I heard a noise in the hall outside, and I jumped to the door to make sure it was still locked. As I returned to the table I realized I was trembling. That wouldn't do. I had to conquer that silly fear, that feeling someone was trying to get at me. I sat down and puffed at my cigarette. I looked at the clippings on the table. Did my uncle use to set them out that way, study them, ponder over them? Did he ever wake in the middle of the night and sit up, waiting for sleepiness to return?

Abruptly I got to my feet, swept the clippings into one big pile, and returned them to the dresser. By mistake I opened the bottom drawer and saw again that queer conglomeration of objects The spectacles, the silver-headed cane, the empty briefcase, the green ribbon, the toy horse, the tortoise-shell comb, and the rest. As I shut the clippings away, I again thought I heard a faint noise and whirled around quickly. This time I didn't go to the door, since I could still see my key in it, unmoved. But I couldn't resist the temptation to look inside the closet. There hung the blue uniform, the cap above, the shoes below, the night stick at one side. David Rhode, Lieutenant of Police, retired July 1, 1927. I shut the door.

I knew I had to get hold of myself. I rehearsed in my mind the obvious and logical reasons for my mood and those unnerving dreams. I was tired and unwell. I hadn't had much sleep for two nights. I was in a strange city. I was sleeping in the room of an uncle whom I had never seen or remembered seeing anyway, and who had been dead for three weeks. I was surrounded by that man's belongings, by the aura of his habits. I had been reading about some particularly gruesome murders. Reasons enough, surely!

If only I could get rid of the conviction that someone was trying to get at me! What could anyone want with me? I had no money. I was a stranger. If only I could get rid of the feeling that my dead uncle was trying to tell me something, make me do something!

I stopped pacing up and down. My glance caught the table top, worn and covered with scratches, but bright under the drop light. It was not quite bare though. I hadn't forgotten any of the clippings, but near one corner lay the scrap of paper I had discovered earlier in the evening. I reached for it again and read the penciled address, 2318 Robey Street.

I can only explain the strange feeling that gripped me by saying it was as if I had for an instant been plunged back into the atmosphere of my dreams. In dreams, perfectly commonplace objects can be invested with an inexplicably horrible significance. It was that way with the slip of paper. I had no idea what the address meant, yet it stared at me like some sentence of doom, like some secret too terrible for a man to know. With a single, quick clutch of my fingers I crumpled it into a ball, dropped it to the floor, and sank down onto the edge of the bed. God help me, I thought, if I went on reacting to things this way. The beginnings of insanity must be like that.

Presently my heart stopped pounding and things got a little clearer in my mind. My senseless terror was subdued, but I realized it might come back at any moment. The thing to do was to get to sleep again before that happened, and take a chance on the dreams.

Once again as I lay in bed, I felt the pressure and the presence of the room. Once again I saw the whole city around me. I had a sensation of breaking down of walls and of floating over an alien expanse of dingy buildings. It was stronger this time.

And then the dream returned. I seemed to be at a meeting of two streets. On my right hand loomed tall structures with many windows, none of which showed a light. On my left hand flowed a broad ugly river. In its oily, slow moving surface were dimly reflected the street lamps on the opposite side. I could see the outlines of a moored barge. One of the streets followed the river and, a little way beyond, ducked under the approach of a bridge made of great steel girders. It was very dark under the bridge. The other street went off at a right angle. The sidewalk was littered with old newspapers, swirled there by the wind. I could not hear their rustling, nor could I smell the chemical stench I knew the river must be exuding. A sick horror seemed to hang over the whole scene.

A small elderly man was approaching along the side street. I knew I must cry out to him, warn him, but I was powerless. He was looking around uncertainly, but I could tell that had

nothing to do with any presence. He was carrying a briefcase, and he tapped the torn newspapers out of his way with a silver-headed cane. As he reached the intersection, another figure stepped out from behind me. It was a dark indistinct figure. I couldn't make out the face. It seemed to be wrapped in shadows. The elderly man's first look of frightened apprehension turned to one of unmixed relief. He seemed to be asking questions and the other, the dark figure, was making replies, I could not hear their voices.

The dark figure pointed down the street that led under the bridge The other smiled and nodded. Fright and terror held me in a vise. I exerted all my will power, but could neither speak nor move closer. Slowly the two figures began to move along the river's edge, side by side. I was like a man frozen. Finally they disappeared in the darkness under the bridge.

There was a long wait. Then the dark figure returned alone. It seemed to see me and move toward me. Terror gripped me and I made a violent effort to escape from the spell that held me.

Then, abruptly, I was free. I seemed to shoot upward at a fantastic speed. In an instant I was so high above the city that I could see the checkerboard of blocks like a map through smoked glass The river was no more than a leaden streak. Off to one side I observed tiny chimneys spurting ghostly fire mills working a night shift. A feeling of terrible and frantic loneliness assailed me. I forgot the scene I had just witnessed on the river bank. My sole desire was to flee from the limitless emptiness in which I was poised. To flee, and find a place of refuge.

At this point my dream became both more and less realistic. Less, because of my impossible swimming and swooping through space, and my sensation of being disembodied. More realistic, because I knew where I was and wanted to get back to my uncle's room, in which my body lay sleeping.

Downward I shot like stone, until I was only a hundred feet above the city. Then my motion changed and I skimmed over what seemed to be miles of rooftops. I noted the soot-covered chimneys and oddly shaped ventilators, the ragged tarpaper, the rain-streaked corrugated iron. Larger buildings offices and factories loomed up ahead like cliffs. I plunged straight through them without retardation, glimpsing flashes of metal and machinery, corridors and partitions. At one time I seemed to be racing a streetcar and beating it. At another I hurtled across several brightly lighted streets, in which many people and

automobiles were moving. Finally my speed began to lessen and I swerved. A dark wall came into view, moved closer, engulfed me, and I was inside my uncle's room.

The most terrible phase of a nightmare is often that in which the dreamer believes himself to be in the very room in which he is sleeping. He recognizes each object but it is subtly distorted. Hideous shapes peer from the darker corners. If he then chances to waken, the dream room is for a time superimposed on the real room. That was the way with me then, except the dream refused to come to an end. I seemed to be hovering near the ceiling, looking down. Most of the objects were as I had last seen them. The table, the cupboard, the dresser, the chairs. But both doors, the one of the closet and the one to the hall, were ajar. And my body was not in the bed. I could see the crumpled sheets, the indented pillow, the blankets flung back. Yet my body was not in the bed.

Immediately my feelings of terror and loneliness rose to a new pitch. I knew that something was dreadfully wrong. I knew that I must find myself quickly. As I hovered, I became aware of an insistent tugging, like the pull a magnetic field exerts on a piece of iron. Instinctively I gave way to it, and was immediately drawn out through the walls into the night.

Again I sped across the darkened city. And now the strangest thoughts were whirling through my mind. They were not dream thoughts but waking thoughts. Horrible suspicions and accusations. Wild trains of deductive reasoning. But my emotions were dream emotions—helpless panic and mounting fear. The house tops over which I skimmed became dingier, grimier and more decrepit. Two-story houses gave way to huddles of sagging shacks. Coal dust choked the clumps of sickly grass. What ground showed was bare or heaped with refuse. My speed lessened and simultaneously my fear mounted.

I noted a dirty sign. "Robey Street," it read. I noted a number. I was in the 2300 block.

"2318 Robey Street."

It was a ramshackle cottage, but neater than its neighbors. I turned off back of the house, where the muddy alley was and the dim shapes of packing cases.

There was a light in the back of the house. The door opened and a little girl stepped out, carrying a small tin pail with a cover on it. She wore a short dress and her legs were thin and her hair was straight and smoky yellow. She turned back for a moment in

the doorway and I heard a coarse female voice say, "Now mind you get over there fast Your Pa likes to have his food hot. And don't stop on the way and don't let nobody see you " I could hear again.

The little girl nodded meekly and started toward the dark alley Then I saw the other figure, the one crouching in the shadows at a spot she must pass. At first I saw only a dark form. Then I came nearer. I saw the face.

It was my own face.

I hope to God no one sees me as I looked then. The indolent mouth twisted into something between a grin and a snarl. Nostrils flared. The nondescript eyes bulging from their sockets so that the white showed all around the pupils. More animal than human.

The little girl was coming nearer. Waves of blackness seemed to oppose me, driving me back, but with one last effort I threw myself at the distorted face I recognized as my own. There was a supreme moment of pain and terror, and then I realized I was looking down at the little girl and she was looking up at me. She was saying, "My, but you scared me. I didn't know who you were at first."

I was in my own body and I knew I wasn't dreaming. Ill-fitting clothes cramped my waist and shoulders, pulled at my wrists. I looked down at the lead-weighted night stick I held in my hand. I reached up and felt for the stiff visored cap on my head, then downward, where in the dim light I could see that I was wearing the dark blue uniform of a policeman.

I do not know what my reaction would have been, if I hadn't realized that the little girl was still staring up at me, puzzled, half-smiling, but frightened I forced my lips to smile. I said, "It's all right, little girl. I'm sorry I scared you. Where does your Pa work? I'll see that you get there safely and I'll bring you home again."

And I did that.

My emotions were exhausted, paralyzed, for the next few hours. By questioning the little girl cautiously, I found out the way to the section of the city in which my uncle's rooming house was situated. Afterwards I managed to return there undetected and strip off the uniform, hang it in the closet.

Next morning I went to the police. I told them nothing of my dreams, my uncanny experience. I only said that the queer assortment of objects in the bottom dresser drawer, in

conjunction with the things mentioned in the clippings, had awakened certain ghastly suspicions in my mind. They were obviously and unpleasantly skeptical, but consented to a routine investigation, which had startling and conclusive results. Most of the objects in the bottom drawer, the silver-headed cane and the rest were identified as having been in the personal possession of the victims of the "Phantom Slayer," and as having disappeared at the time of the murders. For example, the cane and briefcase had been carried by an old man found dead under a viaduct near the river; the toy horse had belonged to a boy murdered in an empty lot; the tortoise-shell comb was similar to one missing from the battered head of a woman whose dead body was found in a residential district; the green ribbon had come from another battered head. A close examination of my uncle's assignments and beats completed the evidence by showing that in almost every case he had been patroling or stationed near the scene of the murder.

There had been at least eight murders, all told. They had begun while my uncle was still on the force, and continued after his retirement.

But apparently he had always worn his uniform to lull his victims' suspicions. The collection of newspaper clippings was attributed to his vanity. The incriminating objects he had kept were explained as "symbols" of his crimes ghastly mementos. "Fetiches," one man called them.

There is no need to describe the degree to which my nerves were shaken by this confirmation of my dreams and my sleep-walking experience. Most of all I was terrified by the notion that some murderous taint in the blood of our family had been communicated to me as well as my uncle.

A considerable time afterwards I related the whole matter, in strict confidence, to a doctor whom I trust He did not question my sanity, as I feared he might. He took my story at face value. But he attributed it to the workings of my unconscious mind. He said that, during my perusal of the clippings, my unconscious mind had realized that my uncle was a murderer, but that my conscious mind had refused to accept the idea. This resulted in a kind of mental turmoil, magnified by my distrait and highly suggestible state. The "will to murder" in my own mind was wakened. The slip of paper with the address written on it somehow focussed that force. In my sleep I had got up, dressed myself in my uncle's uniform and walked to the address. While I

was sleepwalking my mind imagined it was on all sorts of wild journeys through space and into the past.

The doctor has told me of some very remarkable actions performed by other sleepwalkers. And, as he says, I have no way of proving my uncle was really planning to commit that last murder.

I hope his explanation is correct.

The Hill and the Hole

TOM DIGBY SWABBED his face against the rolled-up sleeve of his drill shirt, and good-naturedly damned the whole practice of measuring altitudes with barometric instruments. Now that he was back at the bench mark, which was five hundred eleven feet above sea level, he could see that his reading for the height of the hill was ridiculously off. It figured out to about four hundred forty-seven feet, whereas the hill, in plain view hardly a quarter of a mile away, was obviously somewhere around five hundred seventy or even five hundred eighty. The discrepancy made it a pit instead of a hill. Evidently either he or the altimeter had been cock-eyed when he had taken the reading at the hilltop. And since the altimeter was working well enough now, it looked as if he had been the one.

He would have liked to get away early for lunch with Ben Shelley at Beltonville, but he needed this reading to finish off the oil survey. He had not been able to spot the sandstone-limestone contact he was looking for anywhere but near the top of this particular hill. So he picked up the altimeter, stepped out of the

cool shadow of the barn behind which the bench mark was located, and trudged off. He figured he would be able to finish this little job properly and still be in time for Ben. A grin came to his big, square, youthful face as he thought of how they would chew the fat and josh each other. Ben, like himself, was on the State Geologic Survey.

Fields of shoulder-high corn, dazzling green under the broiling Midwestern sun, stretched away from the hill to the flat horizon. The noonday hush was beginning Blue-bottle flies droned around him as he skirted a manure heap and slid between the weather-gray rails of an old fence. There was no movement, except a vague breeze rippling the corn a couple of fields away and a farmer's car raising a lazy trail of dust far off in the opposite direction. The chunky, competent-looking figure of Tom Digby was the only thing with purpose in the whole landscape.

When he had pushed through the fringe of tall, dry-stalked weeds at the base of the hill, he glanced back at the shabby one-horse farm where the bench mark was located. It looked deserted. Then he made out a little tow-headed girl watching him around the corner of the barn, and he remembered having noticed her earlier. He waved, and chuckled when she dodged back out of sight. Sometimes these farmers' kids were mighty shy. Then he started up the hill at a brisker pace, toward where the bit of strata was so invitingly exposed.

When he reached the top, he did not get the breeze he expected. It seemed, if anything, more stiflingly hot than it had been down below, and there was a feeling of dustiness. He swabbed at his face again, set down the altimeter on a level spot, carefully twisted the dial until the needle stood directly over the middle line of the scale, and started to take the reading from the pointer below.

Then his face clouded. He felt compelled to joggle the instrument, although he knew it was no use. Forcing himself to work very slowly and methodically, he took a second reading. The result was the same as the first. Then he stood up and relieved his feelings with a fancy bit of swearing, more vigorous, but just as good-natured as the blast he had let off at the bench mark.

Allowing for any possible change in barometric pressure during the short period of his climb up from the bench mark, the

altimeter still gave the height of the hill as under four hundred fifty. Even a tornado of fantastic severity could not account for such a difference in pressure.

It would not have been so bad, he told himself disgustedly, if he had been using an old-fashioned aneroid. But a five-hundred-dollar altimeter of the latest design is not supposed to be temperamental. However, there was nothing to do about it now. The altimeter had evidently given its last accurate gasp at the bench mark and gone blooey for good. It would have to be shipped back east to be fixed. And he would have to get along without this particular reading.

He flopped down for a breather before starting back. As he looked out over the checkerboard of fields and the larger checkerboard of sections bounded by dirt roads, it occurred to him how little most people knew about the actual dimensions and boundaries of the world they lived in. They looked at straight lines on a map, and innocently supposed they were straight in reality. They might live all their lives believing their homes were in one county, when accurate surveying would show them to be in another. They were genuinely startled if you explained that the Mason-Dixon line had more jags in it than a rail fence, or if you told them that it was next to impossible to find an accurate and up-to-date detail map of any given district. They did not know how rivers jumped back and forth, putting bits of land first in one state and then in another They had never followed fine-looking, reassuring roads that disappeared into a weedy nowhere. They went along believing that they lived in a world as neat as a geometry-book diagram, while chaps like himself and Ben went around patching the edges together and seeing to it that one mile plus one mile equaled at least something like two miles. Or proving that hills were really hills and not pits in disguise.

It suddenly seemed devilishly hot and close and the bare ground unpleasantly gritty. He tugged at his collar, unbuttoned it further. Time to be getting on to Beltonville. Couple glasses of iced coffee would go good. He hitched himself up, and noticed that the little girl had come out from behind the barn again. She seemed to be waving at him now, with a queer, jerky, beckoning movement; but that was probably just the effect of the heat-shimmer rising from the fields. He waved too, and the movement brought on an abrupt spell of dizziness. A shadow

seemed to surge across the landscape, and he had difficulty in breathing. Then he started down the hill, and pretty soon he was feeling all right again.

"I was a fool to come this far without a hat," he told himself. "This sun will get you, even if you're as healthy as a horse."

Something was nagging at his mind, however, as he realized when he got down in the corn again. It was that he did not like the idea of letting the hill lick him. It occurred to him that he might persuade Ben to come over this afternoon, if he had nothing else to do, and get a precise measurement with alidade and plane table.

When he neared the farm, he saw that the little girl had retreated again to the corner of the barn. He gave her a friendly, "Hello." She did not answer but she did not run away, either. He became aware that she was staring at him in an intent, appraising way.

"You live here?" he asked.

She did not answer. After awhile, she said, "What did you want to go down there for?"

"The State hires me to measure land," he replied. He had reached the bench mark and was automatically starting to take a reading, before he remembered that the altimeter was useless. "This your father's farm?" he asked.

Again she did not answer. She was barefooted, and wore a cotton dress of washed out blue. The sun had bleached her hair and eyebrows several degrees lighter than her skin, giving something of the effect of a photographic negative. Her mouth hung open. Her whole face had a vacuous, yet not exactly stupid expression.

Finally she shook her head solemnly, and said, "You shouldn't of gone down there. You might not have been able to get out again."

"Say, just what are you talking about?" he inquired, humorously, but keeping his voice gentle so she would not run away.

"The hole," she answered.

Tom Digby felt a shiver run over him. "Sun must have hit me harder than I thought," he told himself.

"You mean there's some sort of pit down that way?" he asked quickly. "Maybe an old well or cesspool hidden in the weeds? Well, I didn't fall in. Is it on this side of the hill?" He was still on his knees beside the bench mark.

A look of understanding, mixed with a slight disappointment, came over her face. She nodded wisely and observed, "You're just like Papa. He's always telling me there's a hill there, so I won't be scared of the hole. But he doesn't need to. I know all about it, and I wouldn't go near it again for anything."

"Say, what the dickens are you talking about?" His voice got out of control, and he rather boomed the question at her. But she did not dart away, only continued to stare at him thoughtfully.

"Maybe I've been wrong," she observed finally. "Maybe Papa and you and other people really do see a hill there. Maybe *They* make you see a hill there, so you won't know about them being there. *They* don't like to be bothered. I know. There was a man come up here about two years ago, trying to find out about *Them*. He had a kind of spyglass on sticks. *They* made him dead. That was why I didn't want you to go down there. I was afraid *They* would do the same thing to you."

He disregarded the shiver that was creeping persistently along his spine, just as he had disregarded from the very beginning with automatic scientific distaste for eeriness, the coincidence between the girl's fancy and the inaccurate altimeter readings.

"Who are *They*?" he asked cheerfully

The little girl's blank, watery blue eyes stared past him, as if she were looking at nothing—or everything.

"*They* are dead. Bones. Just bones. But *They* move around. *They* live at the bottom of the hole, and *They* do things there."

"Yes?" he prompted, feeling a trifle guilty at encouraging her. From the corner of his eye he could see an old Model-T chugging up the rutted drive, raising clouds of dust.

"When I was little," she continued in a low voice, so he had to listen hard to catch the words, "I used to go right up to the edge and look down at *Them*. There's a way to climb down in, but I never did. Then one day *They* looked up and caught me spying. Just white bone faces; everything else black. I knew *They* were thinking of making me dead. So I ran away and never went back."

The Model-T rattled to a stop beside the barn, and a tall man in old blue overalls swung out and strode swiftly toward them.

"School Board sent you over?" he shot accusingly at Tom. "You from the County Hospital?"

He clamped his big paw around the girl's hand. He had the same bleached hair and eyebrows, but his face was burnt to a

brick red. There was a strong facial resemblance.

"I want to tell you something," he went on, his voice heavy with anger but under control. "My little girl's all right in the head. It's up to me to judge, isn't it? What if she don't always give the answers the teachers expect She's got a mind of her own, hasn't she? And I'm perfectly fit to take care of her. I don't like the idea of your sneaking around to put a lot of questions to her while I'm gone."

Then his eye fell on the altimeter He glanced at Tom sharply, especially at the riding breeches and high, laced boots.

"I guess I went and made a damn fool of myself," he said swiftly. "You an oil man?"

Tom got to his feet. "I'm on the State Geologic Survey," he said.

The farmer's manner changed completely. He stepped forward, his voice was confidential. "But you saw signs of oil here, didn't you?"

Tom shrugged his shoulders and grinned pleasantly. He had heard a hundred farmers ask that same question in the same way. "I couldn't say anything about that I'd have to finish my mapping before I could make any guesses."

The farmer smiled back, knowingly but not unfriendlily. "I know what you mean," he said. "I know you fellows got orders not to talk. So long, mister."

Tom said, "So long," nodded good-bye to the little girl, who was still gazing at him steadily, and walked around the barn to his own car. As he plumped the altimeter down on the front seat beside him, he yielded to the impulse to take another reading. Once more he swore, this time under his breath.

The altimeter seemed to be working properly again.

"Well," he told himself, "that settles it. I'll come back and get a reliable alidade reading, if not with Ben, then with somebody else. I'll nail that hill down before I do anything."

Ben Shelley slupped down the last drops of coffee, pushed back from the table, and thumbed tobacco into his battered brier. Tom explained his proposition.

A wooden-bladed fan was wheezing ponderously overhead, causing pendant stripes of fly paper to sway and tremble.

"Hold on a minute," Ben interrupted near the end. "That reminds me of something I was bringing over for you. May save us the trouble." And he fished in his brief case.

"You don't mean to tell me there's some map for this region I didn't know about?" The tragic disgust in Tom's voice was only half jocular. "They swore up and down to me at the office there wasn't."

"Yeah, I'm afraid I mean just that," Ben confirmed. "Here she is. A special topographic job. Only issued yesterday."

Tom snatched the folded sheet.

"You're right," he proclaimed, a few moments later. "This might have been some help to me." His voice became sarcastic. "I wonder what they wanted to keep it a mystery for?"

"Oh, you know how it is," said Ben easily. "They take a long time getting maps out. The work for this was done two years ago, before you were on the Survey. It's rather an unusual map, and the person you talked to at the office probably didn't connect it up with your structural job. And there's a yarn about it, which might explain why there was some confusion."

Tom had pushed the dishes away and was studying the map intently. Now he gave a muffled exclamation which made Ben look up. Then he hurriedly reinspected the whole map and the printed material in the corner. Then he stared at one spot for so long that Ben chuckled and said, "What have you found? A gold mine?"

Tom turned a serious face on him. "Look, Ben," he said slowly. "This map is no good. There's a terrible mistake in it." Then he added, "It looks as if they did some of the readings by sighting through a rolled-up newspaper at a yardstick."

"I knew you wouldn't be happy until you found something wrong with it," said Ben. "Can't say I blame you. What is it?"

Tom slid the map across to him, indicating one spot with his thumbnail "Just read that off to me," he directed. "What do you see there?"

Ben paused while he lit his pipe, eyeing the map. Then he answered promptly, "An elevation of four hundred forty-one feet. And it's got a name lettered in 'The Hole.' Poetic, aren't we? Well, what is it? A stone quarry?"

"Ben, I was out at that very spot this morning," said Tom, "and there isn't any depression there at all, but a hill. This reading is merely off some trifle of a hundred and forty feet!"

"Go on," countered Ben. "You were somewhere else this morning. Got mixed up. I've done it myself."

Tom shook his head. "There's a five-hundred-eleven-foot bench mark right next door to it."

"Then you got an old bench mark." Ben was amusedly skeptical. "You know, one of the pre-Columbus ones."

"Oh, rot. Look, Ben, how about coming out with me this afternoon and we'll shoot it with your alidade? I've got to do it some time or other, anyway, now that my altimeter's out of whack. And I'll prove to you this map is chuck-full of errors. How about it?"

Ben applied another match to his pipe. He nodded. "All right, I'm game. But don't be angry when you find you turned in at the wrong farm."

It was not until they were rolling along the highway, with Ben's equipment in the back seat, that Tom remembered something. "Say, Ben, didn't you start to tell me about a yarn connected with this map?"

"It doesn't amount to much really. Just that the surveyor—an old chap named Wolcraftson died of heart failure while he was still in the field. At first they thought someone would have to redo the job, but later, when they went over his papers, they found he had completed it. Maybe that explains why some of the people at the office were in doubt as to whether there was such a map."

Tom was concentrating on the road ahead. They were getting near the turn-off. "That would have been about two years ago?" he asked. "I mean, when he died?"

"Uh-huh. Or two and a half. It happened somewhere around here and there was some kind of stupid mess about it. I seem to remember that a fool county coroner—a local Sherlock Holmes—said there were signs of strangulation, or suffocation, or some other awful nonsense, and wanted to hold Wolcraftson's rodman. Of course, we put a stop to that."

Tom did not answer. Certain words he had heard a couple of hours earlier were coming back to him, just as if a phonograph had been turned on: "Two years ago there was a man come up here, trying to find out about *Them*. He had a kind of spyglass on sticks. *They* make him dead. That's why I didn't want you to go down there. I was afraid *They* would do the same thing to you."

He angrily shut his mind to those words. If there was anything he detested, it was admitting the possibility of supernatural agencies, even in jest. Anyway, what difference did her words make? After all, a man had really died, and it was only natural that her defective imagination should cook up some wild fancy.

Of course, as he had to admit, the screwy entry on the map made one more coincidence, counting the girl's story and the cockeyed altimeter readings as the first. But was it so much of a coincidence? Perhaps Wolcraftson had listened to the girl's prattling and noted down "The Hole" and the reading for it as a kind of private joke, intending to erase it later. Besides, what difference did it make if there had been two genuine coincidences? The universe was full of them. Every molecular collision was a coincidence. You could pile a thousand coincidences on top of another, he averred, and not get Tom Digby one step nearer to believing in the supernatural. Oh, he knew intelligent people enough, all right, who coddled such beliefs. Some of his best friends liked to relate "yarns" and toy with eerie possibilities for the sake of a thrill. But the only emotion Tom ever got out of such stuff was a nauseating disgust. It cut too deep for joking. It was a reversion to that primitive, fear-bound ignorance from which science had slowly lifted man, inch by inch, against the most bitter opposition. Take this silly matter about the hill. Once admit that the dimensions of a thing might not be real, down to the last fraction of an inch, and you cut the foundations from under the world.

He'd be damned, he told himself, if he ever told anyone the whole story of the altimeter readings. It was just the silly sort of "yarn" that Ben, for instance, would like to play around with. Well, he'd have to do without it.

With a feeling of relief he turned off for the farm. He had worked himself up into quite an angry state of mind, and part of the anger was at himself, for even bothering to think about such matters. Now they would finish it off neatly, as scientists should, without leaving any loose ends around for morbid imaginations to knit together.

He led Ben back to the barn, and indicated the bench mark and the hill. Ben got his bearings, studied the map, inspected the bench mark closely, then studied the map again.

Finally he turned with an apologetic grin. "You're absolutely right. This map is as screwy as a surrealist painting, at least as far as that hill is concerned. I'll go around to the car and get my stuff. We can shoot its altitude from right off the bench mark." He paused, frowning. "Gosh, though, I can't understand how Wolcraftson ever got it so screwed up."

"Probably they misinterpreted something on his original manuscript map."

"I suppose that must have been it."

After they had set up the plane table and telescopelike alidade directly over the bench mark, Tom shouldered the rod, with its inset level and conspicuous markings.

"I'll go up there and be rodman for you," he said. "I'd like you to shoot this yourself. Then they won't have any comeback when you walk into the office and blow them up for issuing such a map."

"Okay," Ben answered, laughing. "I'll look forward to doing that."

Tom noticed the farmer coming toward them from the field ahead. He was relieved to see that the little girl was not with him. As they passed one another, the farmer winked triumphantly at him. "Found something worth coming back for, eh?" Tom did not answer. But the farmer's manner tickled his sense of humor, and he found himself feeling pretty good, all irritation gone, as he stepped along toward the hill.

The farmer introduced himself to Ben by saying, "Found signs of a pretty big gusher, eh?" His pretense at being matter-of-fact was not convincing.

"I don't know anything about it," Ben answered cheerfully. "He just roped me in to help him take a reading."

The farmer cocked his big head and looked sideways at Ben. "My, you State fellows are pretty close-mouthed, aren't you? Well, you needn't worry, because I *know* there's oil under here. Five years ago a fellow took a drilling lease on all my land at a dollar a year. But then he never showed up again. Course, I know what happened. The big companies bought him out. They know there's oil under here, but they won't drill. Want to keep the price of gasoline up."

Ben made a noncommittal sound, and busied himself loading his pipe. Then he sighted through the alidade at Tom's back, for no particular reason. The farmer's gaze swung out in the same direction.

"Well, that's a funny thing now, come to think of it," he said. "Right out where he's going, is where that other chap keeled over a couple of years ago."

Ben's interest quickened. "A surveyor named Wolcraftson?"

"Something like that. It happened right on top of that hill. They'd been fooling around here all day something gone wrong with the instruments, the other chap said. Course I knew they'd found signs of oil and didn't want to let on. Along toward

evening the old chap Wolcraftson, like you said took the pole out there himself the other chap had done it twice before and stood atop the hill. It was right then he keeled over. We run out there, but it was too late. Heart got him. He must of thrashed around a lot before he died, though, because he was all covered with dust."

Ben grunted appreciatively. "Wasn't there some question about it afterward?"

"Oh, our coroner made a fool of himself, as he generally does. But I stepped in and told exactly what happened, and that settled it. Say, mister, why don't you break down and tell me what you know about the oil under here?"

Ben's protestations of total ignorance on the subject were cut short by the sudden appearance of a little tow-headed girl from the direction of the road. She had been running She gasped "Papa!" and grabbed the farmer's hand. Ben walked over toward the alidade. He could see the figure of Tom emerging from the tall weeds and starting up the hill. Then his attention was caught by what the girl was saying.

"You've got to stop him, Papa!" She was dragging at her father's wrist. "You can't let him go down in the hole. *They* got it fixed to make him dead this time."

"Shut your mouth, Sue!" the farmer shouted down at her, his voice more anxious than angry. "You'll get me into trouble with the School Board, the queer things you say. That man's just going out there to find out how high the hill is."

"But, Papa, can't you see?" She twisted away and pointed at Tom's steadily mounting figure. "He's already started down in. *They're* set to trap him. Squattin' down there in the dark, all quiet so he won't hear their bones scrapin' together stop him, Papa!"

With an apprehensive look at Ben, the farmer got down on his knees beside the little girl and put his arms around her. "Look, Sue, you're a big girl now," he argued. "It don't do for you to talk that way. I know you're just playing, but other people don't know you so well. They might get to thinking things. You wouldn't want them to take you away from me, would you?"

She was twisting from side to side in his arms trying to catch a glimpse of Tom over his shoulder. Suddenly, with an unexpected backward lunge, she jerked loose and ran off toward the hill. The farmer got to his feet and lumbered after her, calling, "Stop, Sue! Stop!"

Crazy as a couple of hoot owls, Ben decided, watching them go. Both of them think there's something under the ground. One says oil, the other says ghosts. You pay your money and you take your choice.

Then he noticed that during the excitement Tom had gotten to the top of the hill and had the rod up. He hurriedly sighted through the alidade, which was in the direction of the hilltop. For some reason he could not see anything through it—just blackness. He felt forward to make sure the lens cover was off. He swung it around a little, hoping something had not dropped out of place inside the tube. Then abruptly, through it, he caught sight of Tom, and involuntarily he uttered a short, frightened cry and jumped away.

On the hilltop, Tom was no longer in sight. Ben stood still for a moment. Then he raced for the hill at top speed.

He found the farmer looking around perplexedly near the far fence. "Come on," Ben gasped out, "there's trouble," and vaulted over.

When they reached the hilltop, Ben stooped to the sprawling body, then recoiled with a convulsive movement and for a second time uttered a smothered cry. For every square inch of skin and clothes was smeared with a fine, dark-gray dust And close beside one gray hand was a tiny white bone.

Because a certain hideous vision still dominated his memory, Ben needed no one to tell him that it was a bone from a human finger. He buried his face in his hands, fighting that vision.

For what he had seen, or thought he had seen, through the alidade, had been a tiny struggling figure of Tom, buried in darkness, with dim, skeletal figures clutching him all around and dragging him down into a thicker blackness.

The farmer kneeled by the body. "Dead as dead," he muttered in a hushed voice. "Just like the other. He's got the stuff fairly rubbed into him. It's even in his mouth and nose. Like he'd been buried in ashes and then dug up."

From between the rails of the fence, the little girl stared up at them, terrified, but avid.

The Dreams of Albert Moreland

I THINK OF the autumn of 1939, not as the beginning of the Second World War, but as the period in which Albert Moreland dreamed the dream. The two events -the war and the dream— are not, however, divorced in my mind. Indeed, I sometimes fear that there is a connection between them, but it is a connection which no sane person will consider seriously, if he is wise.

Albert Moreland was, and perhaps still is, a professional chessplayer. That fact has an important bearing on the dream, or dreams. He made most of his scant income at a games arcade in Lower Manhattan, taking on all comers the enthusiast who gets a kick out of trying to beat an expert, the lonely man who turns to chess as to a drug, or the down-and-outer tempted into purchasing a half hour of intellectual dignity for a quarter.

After I got to know Moreland, I often wandered into the arcade and watched him playing as many as three or four games simultaneously, oblivious to the clicking and whirring of the pinball games and the intermittent reports from the shooting gallery. He got fifteen cents for every win; the house took the extra dime. When he lost, neither got anything.

Eventually I found out that he was a much better player than

he needed to be for his arcade job He had won casual games from internationally famous masters. A couple of Manhattan clubs had wanted to groom him for the big tournaments, but lack of ambition kept him drifting along in obscurity. I got the impression that he thought chess too trivial a business to warrant serious consideration, although he was perfectly willing to dribble his life away at the arcade, waiting for something really important to come along, if it ever did. Once in a while he eked out his income by playing on a club team, getting as much as five dollars.

I met him at the old brownstone house where we both had rooms on the same floor, and it was there that he first told me about the dream.

We had just finished a game of chess, and I was idly watching the battle-scarred pieces slide off the board and pile up in a fold of the blanket on his cot. Outside a fretful wind eddied the dry grit. There was a surge of traffic noises, and the buzz of a defective neon sign. I had just lost, but I was glad that Moreland never let me win, as he occasionally did with the players at the arcade, to encourage them. Indeed, I thought myself fortunate in being able to play with Moreland at all, not knowing then that I was probably the best friend he had.

I was saying something obvious about chess.

"You think it a complicated game?" he inquired, peering at me with quizzical intentness, his dark eyes like round windows pushed up under heavy eaves. "Well, perhaps it is. But I play a game a thousand times more complex every night in my dreams. And the queer thing is that the game goes on night after night. The same game. I never really sleep. Only dream about the game."

Then he told me, speaking with a mixture of facetious jest and uncomfortable seriousness that was to characterize many of our conversations.

The images of his dream, as he described them, were impressively simple, without any of the usual merging and incongruity. A board so vast he sometimes had to walk out on it to move his pieces. A great many more squares than in chess and arranged in patches of different colors, the power of the pieces varying according to the color of the square on which they stood. Above and to each side of the board only blackness, but a blackness that suggested starless infinity, as if, as he put it, the scene were laid on the very top of the universe.

When he was awake he could not quite remember all the rules of the game, although he recalled a great many isolated points, including the interesting fact that—quite unlike chess—his pieces and those of his adversary did not duplicate each other. Yet he was convinced that he not only understood the game perfectly while dreaming, but also was able to play it in the highly strategic manner of the master chess player. It was, he said, as though his night mind had many more dimensions of thought than his waking mind, and were able to grasp intuitively complex series of moves that would ordinarily have to be reasoned out step by step.

"A feeling of increased mental power is a very ordinary dream-delusion, isn't it?" he added, peering at me sharply. "And so I suppose you might say it's a very ordinary dream."

I did not know quite how to take that last remark, so I prodded him with a question.

"What do the pieces look like?"

It turned out that they were similar to those of chess in that they were considerably stylized and yet suggested the original forms—architectural, animal, ornamental—which had served as their inspiration. But there the similarity ended. The inspiring forms, so far as he could guess at them, were grotesque in the extreme. There were terraced towers subtly distorted out of the perpendicular, strangely asymmetric polygons that made him think of temples and tombs, vegetable-animal shapes which defied classification and whose formalized limbs and external organs suggested a variety of unknown functions. The more powerful pieces seemed to be modeled after life forms, for they carried stylized weapons and other implements, and wore things similar to crowns and tiaras—a little like the king, queen and bishop in chess—while the carving indicated voluminous robes and hoods. But they were in no other sense anthropomorphic. Moreland sought in vain for earthly analogies, mentioning Hindu idols, prehistoric reptiles, futurist sculpture, squids bearing daggers in their tentacles, and huge ants and mantes and other insects with fantastically adapted end-organs.

"I think you would have to search the whole universe—every planet and every dead sun—before you could find the original models," he said, frowning. "Remember, there is nothing cloudy or vague about the pieces themselves in my dream. They are as tangible as this rook." He picked up the piece, clenched his fist around it for a moment, and then held it out toward me on his

open palm. "It is only in what they suggest that the vagueness lies."

It was strange, but his words seemed to open some dream-eye in my own mind, so that I could almost see the things he described. I asked him if he experienced fear during his dream.

He replied that the pieces one and all filled him with repugnance—those based on higher life forms usually to a greater degree than the architectural ones. He hated to have to touch or handle them. There was one piece in particular which had an intensely morbid fascination for his dream-self. He identified it as "the archer" because the stylized weapon it bore gave the impression of being able to hurt at a distance; but like the rest it was quite inhuman. He described it as representing a kind of intermediate, warped life form which had achieved more than human intellectual power without losing -but rather gaining in brute cruelty and malignity. It was one of the opposing pieces for which there was no duplicate among his own. The mingled fear and loathing it inspired in him sometimes became so great that they interfered with his strategic grasp of the whole dream-game, and he was afraid his feeling toward it would sometime rise to such a pitch that he would be forced to capture it just to get it off the board, even though such a capture might compromise his whole position.

"God knows how my mind ever cooked up such a hideous entity," he finished, with a quick grin. "Five hundred years ago I'd have said the Devil put it there."

"Speaking of the Devil," I asked, immediately feeling my flippancy was silly, "whom do you play against in your dream?"

Again he frowned. "I don't know. The opposing pieces move by themselves. I will have made a move, and then, after waiting for what seems like an eon, all on edge as in chess, one of the opposing pieces will begin to shake a little and then to wobble back and forth. Gradually the movement increases in extent until the piece gets off balance and begins to rock and careen across the board, like a water tumbler on a pitching ship, until it reaches the proper square. Then, slowly as it began, the movement subsides. I don't know, but it always makes me think of some huge, invisible, senile creature—crafty, selfish, cruel. You've watched that trembly old man at the arcade? The one who always drags the pieces across the board without lifting them, his hand constantly shaking? It's a little like that."

I nodded. His description made it very vivid. For the first

time I began to think of how unpleasant such a dream might be.

"And it goes on night after night?" I asked.

"Night after night!" he affirmed with sudden fierceness. "And always the same game. It has been more than a month now, and my forces are just beginning to grapple with the enemy. It's draining off my mental energy. I wish it would stop. I'm getting so that I hate to go to sleep." He paused and turned away. "It seems queer," he said after a moment in a softer voice, smiling apologetically, "It seems queer to get so worked up over a dream. But if you've had bad ones, you know how they can cloud your thoughts all day. And I haven't really managed to get over to you the sort of feeling that trips me while I'm dreaming, and while my brain is working at the game and plotting move-sequence after move-sequence and weighing a thousand complex possibilities. There's repugnance, yes, and fear. I've told you that. But the dominant feeling is one of responsibility. I must not lose the game. More than my own personal welfare depends upon it. There are some terrible stakes involved, though I am never quite sure what they are.

"When you were a little child, did you ever worry tremendously about something, with that complete lack of proportion characteristic of childhood? Did you ever feel that everything, literally everything, depended upon your performing some trivial action, some unimportant duty, in just the right way? Well, while I dream, I have the feeling that I'm playing for some stake as big as the fate of mankind. One wrong move may plunge the universe into unending night. Sometimes, in my dream, I feel sure of it."

His voice trailed off and he stared at the chessmen. I made some remarks and started to tell about an air-raid nightmare I had just had, but it didn't seem very important. And I gave him some vague advice about changing his sleeping habits, which did not seem very important either, although he accepted it with good grace. As I started back to my room he said, "Amusing to think, isn't it, that I'll be playing the game again as soon as my head hits the pillow?" He grinned and added lightly, "Perhaps it will be over sooner than I expect Lately I've had the feeling that my adversary is about to unleash a surprise attack, although he pretends to be on the defensive." He grinned again and shut the door.

As I waited for sleep, staring at the wavy churning darkness that is more in the eyes than outside them, I began to wonder

whether Moreland did not stand in greater need of psychiatric treatment than most chessplayers Certainly a person without family, friends, or proper occupation is liable to mental aberrations. Yet he seemed sane enough. Perhaps the dream was a compensation for his failure to use anything like the full potentialities of his highly talented mind, even at chess-playing. Certainly it was a satisfyingly grandiose vision, with its unearthly background and its implications of stupendous mental skill.

There floated into my mind the lines from the *Rubaiyat* about the cosmic chess-player who, "Hither and thither moves and checks, and slays, And one by one back in the Closet lays."

Then I thought of the emotional atmosphere of his dreams, and the feelings of terror and boundless responsibility, of tremendous duties and cataclysmic consequences feelings I recognized from my own dreams and I compared them with the mad, dismal state of the world (for it was October, and sense of utter catastrophe had not yet been dulled) and I thought of the million drifting Morelands suddenly shocked into a realization of the desperate plight of things and of priceless chances lost forever in the past and of their own ill-defined but certain complicity in the disaster. I began to see Moreland's dream as the symbol of a last-ditch, too-late struggle against the implacable forces of fate and chance. And my night thoughts began to revolve around the fancy that some cosmic beings, neither gods nor men, had created human life long ago as a jest or experiment or artistic form, and had now decided to base the fate of their creation on the result of a game of skill played against one of their creatures.

Suddenly I realized that I was wide awake and that the darkness was no longer restful. I snapped on the light and impulsively decided to see if Moreland was still up.

The hall was as shadowy and funereal as that of most boarding houses late at night, and I tried to minimize the inevitable dry creakings. I waited for a few moments in front of Moreland's door, but heard nothing, so instead of knocking, I presumed upon our familiarity and edged open the door, quietly, in order not to disturb him if he were abed.

It was then that I heard his voice, and so certain was my impression that the sound came from a considerable distance that I immediately walked back to the stair-well and called, "Moreland, are you down there?"

Only then did I realize what he had said. Perhaps it was the peculiarity of the words that caused them first to register on my mind as merely a series of sounds.

The words were, "My spider-thing seizes your armor-bearer. I threaten."

It instantly occurred to me that the words were similar in general form to any one of a number of conventional expressions in chess, such as, "My rook captures your bishop. I give check." But there are no such pieces as "spider-things" or "armor-bearers" in chess or any other game I know of.

I automatically walked back towards his room, though I still doubted he was there. The voice had sounded much too far away outside the building or at least in a remote section of it.

But he was lying on the cot, his upturned face revealed by the light of a distant electric advertisement, which blinked on and off at regular intervals. The traffic sounds, which had been almost inaudible in the hall, made the half-darkness restless and irritably alive. The defective neon sign still buzzed and droned insectlike as it had earlier in the evening.

I tiptoed over and looked down at him. His face, more pale than it should have been because of some quality of the intermittent light, was set in an expression of painfully intense concentration forehead vertically furrowed, muscles around the eye contracted, lips pursed to a line. I wondered if I ought to awaken him. I was acutely aware of the impersonally murmuring city all around us block on block of shuttling, routined, aloof existence and the contrast made his sleeping face seem all the more sensitive and vividly individual and unguarded, like some soft though purposefully tense organism which has lost its protective shell.

As I waited uncertainly, the tight lips opened a little without losing any of their tautness. He spoke, and for a second time the impression of distance was so compelling that I involuntarily looked over my shoulder and out the dustily glowing window. Then I began to tremble.

"My coiled-thing writhes to the thirteenth square of the green ruler's domain," was what he said, but I can only suggest the quality of the voice. Some inconceivable sort of distance had drained it of all richness and throatiness and overtones so that it was hollow and flat and faint and disturbingly mournful, as voices sometimes sound in open country, or from up on a high roof, or when there is a bad telephone connection. I felt I was the

victim of some gruesome deception, and yet I knew that ventriloquism is a matter of motionless lips and clever suggestion rather than any really convincing change in the quality of the voice itself. Without volition there rose in my mind visions of infinite space, unending darkness. I felt as if I were being wrenched up and away from the world, so that Manhattan lay below me like a black asymmetric spearhead outlined by leaden waters, and then still farther outward at increasing speed until earth and sun and stars and galaxies were all lost and I was beyond the universe. To such a degree did the quality of Moreland's voice affect me.

I do not know how long I stood there waiting for him to speak again, with the noises of Manhattan flowing around yet not quite touching me, and the electric sign blinking on and off unalterably like the ticking of a clock. I could only think about the game that was being played, and wonder whether Moreland's adversary had yet made an answering move, and whether things were going for or against Moreland. There was no telling from his face; its intensity of concentration did not change. During those moments or minutes I stood there, I believed implicitly in the reality of the game. As if I myself were somehow dreaming, I could not question the rationality of my belief or break the spell which bound me.

When finally his lips parted a little and I experienced again that impression of impossible, eerie ventriloquism—the words this time being, "My horned-creature vaults over the twisted tower, challenging the archer"—my fear broke loose from whatever controlled it and I stumbled toward the door.

Then came what was, in an oblique way, the strangest part of the whole episode. In the time it took me to walk the length of the corridor back to my room, most of my fear and most of the feeling of complete alienage and other-wordliness which had dominated me while I was watching Moreland's face, receded so swiftly that I even forgot, for the time being, how great they had been. I do not know why that happened. Perhaps it was because the unwholesome realm of Moreland's dream was so grotesquely dissimilar to anything in the real world. Whatever the cause, by the time I opened the door to my room I was thinking, "Such nightmares can't be wholesome. Perhaps he should see a psychiatrist. Yet it's only a dream," and so on. I felt tired and stupid. Very soon I was asleep.

But some wraith of the original emotions must have lingered,

for I awoke next morning with the fear that something had happened to Moreland. Dressing hurriedly, I knocked at his door, but found the room empty, the bedclothes still rumpled. I inquired of the landlady, and she said he had gone out at eight-fifteen as usual. The bald statement did not quite satisfy my vague anxiety. But since my job-hunting that day happened to lie in the direction of the arcade, I had an excuse to wander in. Moreland was stolidly pushing pieces around with an abstracted, tousle-haired fellow of Slavic features, and casually conducting two rapid-fire checker games on the side. Reassured, I went on without bothering him.

That evening we had a long talk about dreams in general, and I found him surprisingly well-read on the subject and scientifically cautious in his attitudes. Rather to my chagrin, it was I who introduced such dubious topics as clairvoyance, mental telepathy, and the possibility of strange telescopings and other distortions of time and space during dream states. Some foolish reticence about admitting I had pushed my way into his room last night kept me from telling him what I had heard and seen, but he freely told me he had had another installment of the usual dream. He seemed to take a more philosophical attitude now that he had shared his experiences with someone. Together we speculated as to the possible daytime sources of his dream. It was after twelve when we said goodnight.

I went away with the feeling of having been let down - vaguely unsatisfied. I think the fear I had experienced the previous night and then almost forgotten must have been gnawing at me obscurely.

And the following evening it found an avenue of return. Thinking Moreland must be tired of talking about dreams, I coaxed him into a game of chess. But in the middle of the game he put back a piece he was about to move, and said, "You know, that damned dream of mine is getting very bothersome."

It turned out that his dream adversary had finally loosed the long-threatened attack, and that the dream itself had turned into a kind of nightmare. "It's very much like what happens to you in a game of chess," he explained. "You go along confident that you have a strong position and that the game is taking the right direction. Every move your opponent makes is one you have foreseen. You get to feeling almost omniscient Suddenly he makes a totally unexpected attacking move. For a moment you think it must be a stupid blunder on his part. Then you look a

little more closely and realize that you have totally overlooked something and that his attack is a sound one. Then you begin to sweat.

"Of course, I've always experienced fear and anxiety and a sense of overpowering responsibility during the dream. But my pieces were like a wall, protecting me. Now I can see only the cracks in that wall. At any one of a hundred weak points it might conceivably be broken. Whenever one of the opposing pieces begins to wobble and shake, I wonder whether, when its move is completed, there will flash into my mind the unalterable and unavoidable combination of moves leading to my defeat. Last night I thought I saw such a move, and the terror was so great that everything swirled and I seemed to drop through millions of miles of emptiness in an instant. Yet just in that instant of waking I realized I had miscalculated, and that my position, though perilous, was still secure. It was so vivid that I almost carried with me into my waking thoughts the reason why, but then some of the steps in the train of dream-reasoning dropped out, as if my waking mind were not big enough to hold them all."

He also told me that his fixation on "the archer" was becoming increasingly troublesome. It filled him with a special kind of terror, different in quality, but perhaps higher in pitch than that engendered in him by the dream as a whole: a crazy morbid terror, characterized by intense repugnance, nerve-twisting exasperation, and reckless suicidal impulses.

"I can't get rid of the feeling," he said, "that the beastly thing will in some unfair and underhanded manner be the means of my defeat."

He looked very tired to me, although his face was of the compact, tough-skinned sort that does not readily show fatigue, and I felt concern for his physical and nervous welfare. I suggested that he consult a doctor (I did not like to say psychiatrist) and pointed out that sleeping tablets might be of some help.

"But in a deeper sleep the dream might be even more vivid and real," he answered, grimacing sardonically. "No, I'd rather play out the game under the present conditions."

I was glad to find that he still viewed the dream as an interesting and temporary psychological phenomenon (what else he could have viewed it as, I did not stop to analyze). Even while admitting to me the exceptional intensity of his emotions, he maintained something of a jesting air. Once he compared his

dream to a paranoid's delusions of persecution, and asked whether I didn't think it was good enough to get him admitted to an asylum.

"Then I could forget the arcade and devote all my time to dream-chess," he said, laughing sharply as soon as he saw I was beginning to wonder whether he had not meant the remark half-seriously.

But some part of my mind was not convinced by his protestations, and when later I tossed in the dark, my imagination perversely kept picturing the universe as a great arena in which each creature is doomed to engage in a losing game of skill against demoniac mentalities which, however long they may play cat and mouse, are always assured of final mastery—or almost assured, so that it would be a miracle if they were beaten. I found myself comparing them to certain chessplayers, who if they cannot beat an opponent by superior skill, will capitalize on unpleasant personal mannerisms in order to exasperate him and break down the lucidity of his thinking.

This mood colored my own nebulous dreams and persisted into the next day. As I walked the streets I felt myself inundated by an omnipresent anxiety, and I sensed taut, nervous misery in each passing face. For once I seemed able to look behind the mask which every person wears and which is so characteristically pronounced in a congested city, and see what lay behind the egotistical sensitivity, the smouldering irritation, the thwarted longing, the defeat . . . and, above all, the anxiety, too ill-defined and lacking in definite object to be called fear, but nonetheless infecting every thought and action, and making trivial things terrible. And it seemed to me that social, economic, and physiological factors, even Death and the War, were insufficient to explain such anxiety, and that it was in reality an upwelling from something dubious and horrible in the very constitution of the universe.

That evening I found myself at the arcade. Here too I sensed a difference in things, for Moreland's abstraction was not the calculating boredom with which I was familiar, and his tiredness was shockingly apparent. One of his three opponents, after shifting around restlessly, called his attention to a move, and Moreland jerked his head as if he had been dozing. He immediately made an answering move, and quickly lost his queen and the game by a trap that was very obvious even to me. A little later he lost another game by an equally elementary

oversight. The boss of the arcade, a big beefy man, ambled over and stood behind Moreland, his heavy-jowled face impassive, seeming to study the position of the pieces in the last game. Moreland lost that too.

"Who won?" asked the boss.

Moreland indicated his opponent. The boss grunted noncommittally and walked off.

No one else sat down to play. It was near closing time. I was not sure whether Moreland had noticed me, but after a while he stood up and nodded at me, and got his hat and coat. We walked the long stretch back to the rooming house. He hardly spoke a word, and my sensation of morbid insight into the world around persisted and kept me silent. He walked as usual with long, slightly stiff-kneed strides, hands in his pockets, hat pulled low, frowning at the pavement a dozen feet ahead.

When we reached the room he sat down without taking off his coat and said, "Of course, it was the dream made me lose those games. When I woke this morning it was terribly vivid, and I almost remembered the exact position and all the rules. I started to make a diagram...."

He indicated a piece of wrapping paper on the table. Hasty crisscrossed lines, incomplete, represented what seemed to be the corner of an indefinitely larger pattern. There were about five hundred squares. On various squares were marks and names standing for pieces, and there were arrows radiating out from the pieces to show their power of movement.

"I got that far. Then I began to forget," he said tiredly, staring at the floor. "But I'm still very close to it. Like a mathematical puzzle you've not quite solved. Parts of the board kept flashing into my mind all day, so that I felt with a little more effort I would be able to grasp the whole. Yet I can't."

His voice changed. "I'm going to lose, you know. It's that piece I call 'the archer.' Last night I couldn't concentrate on the board, it kept drawing my eyes. The worst thing is that it's the spearhead of my adversary's attack. I ache to capture it. But I must not, for it's a kind of catspaw too, the bait of the strategic trap my adversary is laying. If I capture it, I will expose myself to defeat. So I must watch it coming closer and closer –it has an ugly, double-angled sort of hopping move—knowing that my only chance is to sit tight until my adversary overreaches himself and I can counterattack. But I won't be able to. Soon, perhaps tonight, my nerve will crack and I will capture it."

I was studying the diagram with great interest, and only half heard the rest a description of the actual appearance of "the archer." I heard him say something about "a five-lobed head . . . the head almost hidden by a hood . . . appendages, each with four joints, appearing from under the robe . . . an eight-pronged weapon with wheels and levers about it, and little bag-shaped receptacles, as though for poison . . . posture suggesting it is lifting the weapon to aim it . . all intricately carved in some lustrous red stone, speckled with violet . . . an expression of bestial, supernatural malevolence. . . ."

Just then all my attention focussed suddenly on the diagram, and I felt a tightening shiver of excitement, for I recognized two familiar names, which I had never heard Moreland mention while awake. "Spider-thing" and "green ruler."

Without pausing to think, I told him of how I had listened to his sleep-talking three nights before, and about the peculiar phrases he had spoken which tallied so well with the entries on the diagram. I poured out my account with melodramatic haste. My discovery of the entries on the diagram, nothing exceptionally amazing in itself, probably made such a great impression on me because I had hitherto strangely forgotten or repressed the intense fear I had experienced when I had watched Moreland sleeping.

Before I was finished, however, I noticed the growing anxiety of his expression, and abruptly realized that what I was saying might not have the best effect on him. So I minimized my recollection of the unwholesome quality of his voice– the overpowering impression of distance—and the fear it engendered in me.

Even so, it was obvious that he had received a severe shock. For a little while he seemed to be on the verge of some serious nervous derangement, walking up and down with fierce, jerky movements, throwing out crazy statements, coming back again and again to the diabolical convincingness of the dream which my revelation seemed to have intensified for him and finally breaking down into vague appeals for help.

Those appeals had an immediate effect on me, making me forget any wild thoughts of my own and putting everything on a personal level. All my instincts were now to aid Moreland, and I once again saw the whole matter as something for a psychiatrist to handle. Our roles had changed. I was no longer the half-awed listener, but the steadying friend to whom he turned for advice.

That, more than anything, gave me a feeling of confidence and made my previous speculations seem childish and unhealthy. I felt contemptuous of myself for having encouraged his delusive trains of imagination, and I did as much as I could to make up for it.

After a while my repeated reassurances seemed to take effect. He grew calm and our talk became reasonable once more, though every now and then he would appeal to me about some particular point that worried him. I discovered for the first time the extent to which he had taken the dream seriously. During his lonely broodings, he told me, he had sometimes become convinced that his mind left his body while he slept and traveled immeasurable distances to some transcosmic realm where the game was played. He had the illusion, he said, of getting perilously close to the innermost secrets of the universe and finding they were rotten and evil and sardonic. At times he had been terribly afraid that the pathway between his mind and the realm of the game would "open up" to such a degree that he would be "sucked up bodily from the world," as he put it. His belief that loss of the game would doom the world itself had been much stronger than he had ever admitted to me previously. He had traced a frightening relationship between the progress of the game and of the War, and had begun to believe that the ultimate issue of the War -though not necessarily the victory of either side hung on the outcome of the game.

At times it had got so bad, he revealed, that his only relief had been in the thought that, no matter what happened, he could never convince others of the reality of his dream. They would always be able to view it as a manifestation of insanity or overwrought imagination. No matter how vivid it became to him he would never have concrete, objective proof.

"It's this way," he said. "You saw me sleeping, didn't you? Right here on this cot. You heard me talk in my sleep, didn't you? About the game. Well, that absolutely proves to you that it's all just a dream, doesn't it? You couldn't rightly believe anything else, could you?"

I do not know why those last ambiguous questions of his should have had such a reassuring effect on me of all people, who had only three nights ago trembled at the indescribable quality of his voice as he talked from his dream. But they did. They seemed like the final seal on an agreement between us to the effect that the dream was only a dream and meant nothing. I

began to feel rather buoyant and self-satisfied, like a doctor who has just pulled his patient through a dangerous crisis. I talked to Moreland in what I now realize was almost a pompously sympathetic way, without noticing how dispirited were his obedient nods of agreement. He said little after those last questions.

I even persuaded him to go out to a nearby lunchroom for a midnight snack, as if God help me! I were celebrating my victory over the dream. As we sat at the not-too-dirty counter, smoking our cigarettes and sipping burningly hot coffee, I noticed that he had begun to smile again, which added to my satisfaction. I was blind to the ultimate dejection and submissive hopelessness that lay behind those smiles. As I left him at the door of his room, he suddenly caught hold of my hand and said, "I want to tell you how grateful I am for the way you've worked to pull me out of this mess." I made a deprecating gesture. "No, wait," he continued. "It does mean a lot. Well, anyway, thanks."

I went away with a contented, almost virtuous feeling. I had no apprehensions whatever. I only mused, in a heavily philosophic way, over the strange forms fear and anxiety can assume in our painfully tangled civilization.

As soon as I was dressed next morning, I rapped briskly at his door and impulsively pushed in without waiting for an answer. For once sunlight was pouring through the dusty window.

Then I saw it, and everything else receded.

It was lying on the crumpled bedclothes, half hidden by a fold of blanket, a thing perhaps ten inches high, as solid as any statuette, and as undeniably real. But from the first glance I knew that its form bore no relation to any earthly creature. This fact would have been as apparent to someone who knew nothing of art as to an expert. I also knew that the red, violet-flecked substance from which it had been carved or cast had no classification among the earthly gems and minerals. Every detail was there. The five-lobed head, almost hidden by a hood. The appendages, each with four joints, appearing from under the robe. The eight-pronged weapon with wheels and levers about it, and the little bag-shaped receptacles, as though for poison. Posture suggesting it was lifting the weapon to aim it. An expression of bestial, supernatural malevolence.

Beyond doubting, it was the thing of which Moreland had dreamed. The thing which had horrified and fascinated him, as it now did me, which had rasped unendurably on his nerves, as it

now began to rasp on mine. The thing which had been the spearhead and catspaw of his adversary's attack, and whose capture and it now seemed evident that it had been captured—meant the probable loss of the game. The thing which had somehow been sucked back along an ever-opening path across unimaginable distances from a realm of madness ruling the universe.

Beyond doubting, it was "the archer."

Hardly knowing what moved me, save fear, or what my purpose was, I fled from the room. Then I realized that I must find Moreland. No one had seen him leaving the house. I searched for him all day. The arcade. Chess clubs. Libraries.

It was evening when I went back and forced myself to enter his room. The figure was no longer there. No one at the house professed to know anything about it when I questioned them, but some of the denials were too angry, and I know that "the archer," being obviously a thing of value and having no overly great terrors for those who do not know its history, has most probably found its way into the hands of some wealthy and eccentric collector. Other things have vanished by a similar route in the past.

Or it may be that Moreland returned secretly and took it away with him.

But I am certain that it was not made on earth.

And although there are reasons to fear the contrary, I feel that somewhere—in some cheap boarding house or lodging place, or in some madhouse—Albert Moreland, if the game is not already lost and the forfeiture begun, is still playing that unbelievable game for stakes it is unwholesome to contemplate.

The Hound

DAVID LASHLEY HUDDLED the skimpy blankets around him and dully watched the cold light of morning seep through the window and stiffen in his room. He could not recall the exact nature of the terror against which he had fought his way to wakefulness, except that it had been in some way gigantic and had brought back to him the fear-ridden helplessness of childhood. It had lurked near him all night and finally it had crouched over him and thrust down toward his face.

The radiator whined dismally with the first push of steam from the basement, and he shivered in response. He thought that his shivering was an ironically humorous recognition of the fact that his room was never warm except when he was out of it. But there was more to it than that. The penetrating whine had touched something in his mind without being quite able to dislodge it into consciousness. The mounting rumble of city traffic, together with the hoarse panting of a locomotive in the railroad yards, mingled themselves with the nearer sound, intensifying its disturbing tug at hidden fears. For a few

moments he lay inert, listening. There was an unpleasent stench too in the room, he noticed, but that was nothing to be surprised at. He had experienced more than once the strange olfactory illusions that are part of the aftermath of flu Then he heard his mother moving about laboriously in the kitchen, and that stung him into action.

"Have you another cold?" she asked, watching him anxiously as he hurriedly spooned in a boiled egg before its heat should be entirely lost in the chilly plate. "Are you sure?" she persisted. "I heard someone sniffling all night."

"Perhaps Father—" he began. She shook her head "No, he's all right. His side was giving him a lot of pain yesterday evening, but he slept quietly enough. That's why I thought it must be you, David. I got up twice to see, but" her voice became a little doleful "I know you don't like me to come poking into your room at all hours."

"That's not true!" he contradicted. She looked so frail and little and worn, standing there in front of the stove with one of Father's shapeless bathrobes hugged around her, so like a sick sparrow trying to appear chipper, that a futile irritation, an indignation that he couldn't help her more, welled up within him, choking his voice a little. "It's that I don't want you getting up all the time and missing your sleep. You have enough to do taking care of Father all day long. And I've told you a dozen times that you mustn't make breakfast for me. You know the doctor says you need all the rest you can get."

"Oh, *I'm* all right," she answered quickly, "but I was sure you'd caught another cold. All night long I kept hearing it a sniffling and a snuffling—"

Coffee spilled over into the saucer as David set down the half-raised cup. His mother's words had reawakened the elusive memory, and now that it had come back he did not want to look it in the face.

"It's late, I'll have to rush," he said.

She accompanied him to the door, so accustomed to his hastiness that she saw in it nothing unusual. Her wan voice followed him down the dark apartment stair: "I hope a rat hasn't died in the walls Did you notice the nasty smell?"

And then he was out of the door and had lost himself and his memories in the early morning rush of the city. Tires singing on asphalt. Cold engines coughing, then starting with a roar. Heels clicking on the sidewalk, hurrying, trotting, converging on street

car intersections and elevated stations. Low heels, high heels, heels of stenographers bound downtown, and of war workers headed for the outlying factories. Shouts of newsboys and glimpses of headlines. "AIR BLITZ ON . . . BATTLESHIP SUNK . BLACKOUT EXPECTED HERE . DRIVEN BACK."

But sitting in the stuffy solemnity of the street car, it was impossible to keep from thinking of it any longer Besides, the stale medicinal smell of the yellow woodwork immediately brought back the memory of that other smell. David Lashley clenched his hands in his overcoat pockets and asked himself how it was possible for a grown man to be so suddenly overwhelmed by a fear from childhood. Yet in the same instant he knew with acute certainty that this was no childhood fear, this thing that had pursued him up the years, growing ever more vast and menacing, until, like the demon wolf Fenris at Ragnorak, its gaping jaws scraped heaven and earth, seeking to open wider. This thing that had dogged his footsteps, sometimes so far behind that he forget its existence, but now so close that he could feel its cold sick breath on his neck. Werewolves? He had read up on such things at the library, fingering dusty books in uneasy fascination, but what he had read made them seem innocuous and without significance dead superstitions in comparison with this thing that was part and parcel of the great sprawling cities and chaotic peoples of the Twentieth Century, so much a part that he, David Lashley, winced at the endlessly varying howls and growls of traffic and industry sounds at once animal and mechanical, shrank back with a start from the sight of headlights at night those dazzling unwinking eyes; trembled uncontrollably if he heard the scuffling of rats in an alley or caught sight in the evenings of the shadowy forms of lean mongrel dogs looking for food in vacant lots. "Sniffling and snuffling," his mother had said. What better words could you want to describe the inquisitive, persistent pryings of the beast that had crouched outside the bedroom door all night in his dreams and then finally pushed through to plant its dirty paws on his chest. For a moment he saw, superimposed on the yellow ceiling and garish advertising placards of the streetcar, its malformed muzzle . . the red eyes like thickly scummed molten metal . . the jaws slavered with thick black oil . . .

Wildly he looked around at his fellow passengers, seeking to blot out that vision, but it seemed to have slipped down into all of them, infecting them, giving their features an ugly canine

cast—the slack, receding jaw of an otherwise pretty blond, the narrow head and wide-set eyes of an unshaven mechanic returning from the night shift. He sought refuge in the open newspaper of the man sitting beside him, studying it intently without regard for the impression of rudeness he was creating. But there was a wolf in the cartoon and he quickly turned away to stare through the dusty pane at the stores sliding by. Gradually the sense of oppressive menace lifted a little. But the cartoon had established another contact in his brain—the memory of a cartoon from the First World War. What the wolf or hound in that earlier cartoon had represented—war, famine, or the ruthlessness of the enemy—he could not say, but it had haunted his dreams for weeks, crouched in corners, and waited for him at the head of the stairs. Later he had tried to explain to friends the horrors that may lie in the concrete symbolisms and personifications of a cartoon if interpreted naively by a child, but had been unable to get his idea across.

The conductor growled out the name of a downtown street, and once again he lost himself in the crowd, finding relief in the never-ceasing movement, the brushing of shoulders against his own. But as the time-clock emitted its delayed musical bong! and he turned to stick his card in the rack, the girl at the desk looked up and remarked, "Aren't you going to punch in for your dog, too?"

"My dog?"

"Well, it was there just a second ago. Came in right behind you, looking as if it owned you—I mean you owned it." She giggled briefly through her nose. "One of Mrs. Montmorency's mastiffs come to inspect conditions among the working class, I presume."

He continued to stare at her blankly. "A joke," she explained patiently, and returned to her work.

"I've got to get a grip on myself," he found himself muttering tritely as the elevator lowered him noiselessly to the basement.

He kept repeating it as he hurried to the locker room, left his coat and lunch, gave his hair a quick careful brushing, hurried again through the still-empty aisles, and slipped in behind the socks-and-handkerchiefs counter. "It's just nerves. I'm not crazy. But I've got to get a grip on myself."

"Of course you're crazy. Don't you know that talking to yourself and not noticing anybody is the first symptom of insanity?"

Gertrude Rees had stopped on her way over to neckties. Light brown hair, painstakingly waved and ordered, framed a serious not-too-pretty face.

"Sorry," he murmured. "I'm jittery." What else could you say? Even to Gertrude.

She grimaced sympathetically. Her hand slipped across the counter to squeeze his for a moment.

But even as he watched her walk away, his hands automatically setting out the display boxes, the new question was furiously hammering in his brain. What else could you say? What words could you use to explain it? Above all, to whom could you tell it? A dozen names printed themselves in his mind and were as quickly discarded.

One remained. Tom Goodsell. He would tell Tom. Tonight, after the first-aid class.

Shoppers were already filtering into the basement. "He wears size eleven, Madam? Yes, we have some new patterns. These are silk and lisle." But their ever-increasing numbers gave him no sense of security. Crowding the aisles, they became shapes behind which something might hide. He was continually peering past them. A little child who wandered behind the counter and pushed at his knee, gave him a sudden fright.

Lunch came early for him. He arrived at the locker room in time to catch hold of Gertrude Rees as she retreated uncertainly from the dark doorway.

"Dog," she gasped. "Huge one. Gave me an awful start. Talk about jitters! Wonder where he could have come from? Watch out. He looked nasty."

But David, impelled by sudden recklessness born of fear and shock, was already inside and switching on the light.

"No dog in sight," he told her.

"You're crazy. It must be there." Her face, gingerly poked through the doorway, lengthened in surprise. "But I tell you I Oh, I guess it must have pushed out through the other door."

He did not tell her that the other door was bolted.

"I suppose a customer brought it in," she rattled on nervously. "Some of them can't seem to shop unless they've got a pair of Russian wolfhounds. Though that kind usually keeps out of the bargain basement. I suppose we ought to find it before we eat lunch. It looked dangerous."

But he hardly heard her. He had just noticed that his locker was open and his overcoat dragged down on the floor. The

brown paper bag containing his lunch had been torn open and the contents rummaged through, as if an animal had been nosing at it. As he stooped, he saw that there were greasy, black stains on the sandwiches, and a familiar stale stench rose to his nostrils

That night he found Tom Goodsell in a nervous, expansive mood. The latter had been called up and would start for camp in a week As they sipped coffee in the empty little restaurant, Tom poured out a flood of talk about old times. David would have been able to listen better, had not the uncertain, shadowy shapes outside the window been continually distracting his attention. Eventually he found an opportunity to turn the conversation down the channels which absorbed his mind

"The supernatural beings of a modern city?" Tom answered, seeming to find nothing out of the way in the question. "Sure, they'd be different from the ghosts of yesterday. Each culture creates its own ghosts. Look, the Middle Ages built cathedrals, and pretty soon there were little gray shapes gliding around at night to talk with the gargoyles. Same thing ought to happen to us, with our skyscrapers and factories." He spoke eagerly, with all his old poetic flare, as if he'd just been meaning to discuss this very matter. He would talk about anything tonight. "I'll tell you how it works, Dave. We begin by denying all the old haunts and superstitions. Why shouldn't we? They belong to the era of cottage and castle. They can't take root in the new environment. Science goes materialistic, proving that there isn't anything in the universe except tiny bundles of energy As if, for that matter, a tiny bundle of energy mightn't mean anything.

"But wait, that's just the beginning. We go on inventing and discovering and organizing. We cover the earth with huge structures We pile them together in great heaps that make old Rome and Alexandria and Babylon seem almost toy-towns by comparison. The new environment, you see, is forming."

David stared at him with incredulous fascination, profoundly disturbed This was not at all what he had expected or hoped for this almost telepathic prying into his most hidden fears. He had wanted to talk about these things—yes but in a skeptical reassuring way. Instead, Tom sounded almost serious. David started to speak, but Tom held up his finger for silence, aping the gesture of a schoolteacher.

"Meanwhile, what's happening inside each one of us? I'll tell you. All sorts of inhibited emotions are accumulating. Fear is accumulating. Horror is accumulating. A new kind of awe of the

mysteries of the universe is accumulating. A psychological environment is forming, along with the physical one. Wait, let me finish. Our culture becomes ripe for infection. From somewhere. It's just like a bacteriologist's culture—I didn't intend the pun when it gets to the right temperature and consistency for supporting a colony of germs. Similarly, our culture suddenly spawns a horde of demons. And, like germs, they have a peculiar affinity for our culture. They're unique. They fit in. You wouldn't find the same kind any other time or place.

"How would you know when the infection had taken place? Say, you're taking this pretty seriously, aren't you? Well, so am I, maybe. Why, they'd haunt us, terrorize us, try to rule us. Our fears would be their fodder. A parasite-host relationship. Supernatural symbiosis. Some of us the sensitive ones would notice them sooner than others. Some of us might see them without knowing what they were. Others might know about them without seeing them. Like me, eh?

"What was that? I didn't catch your remark. Oh, about werewolves. Well, that's a pretty special question, but tonight I'd take a crack at anything. Yes, I think there'd be werewolves among our demons, but they wouldn't be much like the old ones. No nice clean fur, white teeth and shining eyes. Oh, no. Instead you'd get some nasty hound that wouldn't surprise you if you saw it nosing at a garbage pail or crawling out from under a truck. Frighten and terrorize you, yes. But surprise, no. It would fit into the environment. Look as if it belonged in a city and smell the same. Because of the twisted emotions that would be its food, your emotions and mine. A matter of diet."

Tom Goodsell chuckled loudly and lit another cigarette. But David only stared at the scarred counter. He realized he couldn't tell Tom what had happened this morning or this noon. Of course, Tom would immediately scoff and be skeptical. But that wouldn't get around the fact that Tom had already agreed agreed in partial jest perhaps, but still agreed. And Tom himself confirmed this, when, in a more serious, friendlier voice, he said:

"Oh, I know I've talked a lot of rot tonight, but still, you know, the way things are, there's something to it. At least, I can't express my feelings any other way."

They shook hands at the corner, and David rode the surging street car home through a city whose every bolt and stone seemed subtly infected, whose every noise carried shuddering

overtones. His mother was waiting up for him, and after he had wearily argued with her about getting more rest and seen her off to bed, he lay sleepless himself, all through the night, like a child in a strange house, listening to each tiny noise and watching intently each changing shape taken by the shadows.

That night nothing shouldered through the door or pressed its muzzle against the window pane.

Yet he found that it cost him an effort to go down to the department store next morning, so conscious was he of the thing's presence in the faces and forms, the structures and machines around him. It was as if he were forcing himself into the heart of a monster. Detestation of the city grew within him. As yesterday, the crowded aisles seemed only hiding places, and he avoided the locker room. Gertrude Rees remarked sympathetically on his fatigued look, and he took the opportunity to invite her out that evening. Of course, he told himself while they sat watching the movie, she wasn't very close to him. None of the girls had been close to him—a not-very-competent young man tied down to the task of supporting parents whose little reserve of money had long ago dribbled away. He had dated them for a while, talked to them, told them his beliefs and ambitions, and then one by one they had drifted off to marry other men. But that did not change the fact that he needed the wholesomeness Gertrude could give him.

And as they walked home through the chilly night, he found himself talking inconsequentially and laughing at his own jokes. Then, as they turned to one another in the shadowy vestibule and she lifted her lips, he sensed her features altering queerly, lengthening. "A funny sort of light here," he thought as he took her in his arms. But the thin strip of fur on her collar grew matted and oily under his touch, her fingers grew hard and sharp against his back, he felt her teeth pushing out against her lips, and then a sharp, prickling sensation as of icy needles.

Blindly he pushed away from her, then saw—and the sight stopped him dead—that she had not changed at all or that whatever change had been was now gone.

"What's the matter, dear?" he heard her ask startledly. "What's happened? What's that you're mumbling? Changed, you say? What's changed? Infected with it? What do you mean? For heaven's sake, don't talk that way. You've done it to me, you say? Done what?" He felt her hand on his arm, a soft hand now. "No, you're not crazy. Don't think of such things. But you're

neurotic and maybe a little batty. For heaven's sake, pull yourself together."

"I don't know what happened to me," he managed to say, in his right voice again. Then, because he had to say something more: "My nerves all jumped, like someone had snapped them."

He expected her to be angry, but she seemed only puzzledly sympathetic, as if she liked him but had become afraid of him, as if she sensed something wrong in him beyond her powers of understanding or repair.

"Do take care of yourself," she said doubtfully. "We're all a little crazy now and then, I guess. My nerves get like wires too. Goodnight."

He watched her disappear up the stair. Then he turned and ran.

At home his mother was waiting up again, close to the hall radiator to catch its dying warmth, the inevitable shapeless bathrobe wrapped about her. Because of a new thought that had come to the forefront of his brain, he avoided her embrace and, after a few brief words, hurried off toward his room. But she followed him down the hall.

"You're not looking at all well, David," she told him anxiously, whispering because Father might be asleep. "Are you sure you're not getting flu again? Don't you think you should see the doctor tomorrow?" Then she went on quickly to another subject, using that nervously apologetic tone with which he was so familiar. "I shouldn't bother you with it, David, but you really must be more careful of the bedclothes. You'd laid something greasy on the coverlet and there were big, black stains."

He was pushing open the bedroom door. Her words halted his hand only for an instant. How could you avoid the thing by going one place rather than another?

"And one thing more," she added, as he switched on the lights. "Will you try to get some cardboard tomorrow to black out the windows? They're out of it at the stores around here and the radio says we should be ready."

"Yes, I will. Goodnight, mother."

"Oh, and something else," she persisted, lingering uneasily just beyond the door. "That really must be a dead rat in the walls. The smell keeps coming in waves. I spoke to the real-estate agent, but he hasn't done anything about it. I wish you'd speak to him."

"Yes. Goodnight, Mother."

He waited until he heard her door softly close. He lit a cigarette and slumped down on the bed to try and think as clearly as he could about something to which everyday ideas could not be applied.

Question One (and he realized with an ironic twinge that it sounded melodramatic enough for a dime-novel): Was Gertrude Rees what might be called, for want of a better term, a werewolf? Answer: Almost certainly not, in any ordinary sense of the word. What had momentarily come to her had been something he had communicated to her. It had happened because of his presence. And either his own shock had interrupted the transformation or else Gertrude Rees had not proved a suitable vehicle of incarnation for the thing.

Question Two: Might he not communicate the thing to some other person? Answer: Yes. For a moment his thinking paused, as there swept before his mind's eye kaleidoscopic visions of the faces which might, without warning, begin to change in his presence: His mother, his father, Tom Goodsell, the prim-mouthed real estate agent, a customer at the store, a panhandler who would approach him on a rainy night.

Question Three: Was there any escape from the thing? Answer: No. And yet—There was one bare possibility. Escape from the city. The city had bred the thing; might it not be chained to the city? It hardly seemed to be a reasonable possibility; how could a supernatural entity be tied down to one locality? And yet— he stepped quickly to the window and, after a moment's hesitation, jerked it up. Sounds which had been temporarily blotted out by his thinking now poured past him in quadrupled volume, mixing together discordantly like instruments tuning up for some titanic symphony— the racking surge of street car and elevated, the coughing of a locomotive in the yards, the hum of tires on asphalt and the growl of engines, the mumbling of radio voices, the faint mournful note of distant horns. But now they were no longer separate sounds. They all issued from one cavernous throat— a single moan, infinitely penetrating, infinitely menacing. He slammed down the window and put his hands to his ears. He switched out the lights and threw himself on the bed, burying his head in the pillows. Still the sound came through. And it was then he realized that ultimately, whether he wanted to or not, the thing would drive him from the city. The moment would come when the sound would begin to penetrate too deeply, to reverberate too unendurably in his ears.

The sight of so many faces, trembling on the brink of an almost unimaginable change, would become too much for him. And he would leave whatever he was doing and go away.

The moment came a little after four o'clock next afternoon. He could not say what sensation it was that, adding its straw-weight to the rest, drove him to take the step. Perhaps it was a heaving movement in the rack of dresses two counters away; perhaps it was the snoutlike appearance momentarily taken by a crumpled piece of cloth. Whatever it was, he slipped from behind the counter without a word, leaving a customer to mutter indignantly, and walked up the stair and out into the street, moving almost like a sleep-walker yet constantly edging from side to side to avoid any direct contact with the crowd engulfing him. Once in the street, he took the first car that came by, never noting its number, and found himself an empty place in the corner of the front platform.

With ominous slowness at first, then with increasing rapidity the heart of the city was left behind. A great gloomy bridge spanning an oily river was passed over, and the frowning cliffs of the buildings grew lower. Warehouses gave way to factories, factories to apartment buildings, apartment buildings to dwellings which were at first small and dirty white, then large and mansion-like but very much decayed, then new and monotonous in their uniformity. Peoples of different economic status and racial affiliation filed in and emptied out as the different strata of the city were passed through. Finally the vacant lots began to come, at first one by one, then in increasing numbers, until the houses were spaced out two or three to a block.

"End of the line," sang out the conductor, and without hesitation David swung down from the platform and walked on in the same direction that the street car had been going. He did not hurry He did not lag. He moved as an automaton that had been wound up and set going, and will not stop until it runs down.

The sun was setting smokingly red in the west. He could not see it because of a tree-fringed rise ahead, but its last rays winked at him from the window panes of little houses blocks off to the right and left, as if flaming lights had been lit inside. As he moved they flashed on and off like signals. Two blocks further on the sidewalk ended, and he walked down the center of a muddy lane. After passing a final house, the lane also came to an end, giving way to a narrow dirt path between high weeds. The

path led up the rise and through the fringe of trees Emerging on the other side, he slowed his pace and finally stopped, so bewilderingly fantastic was the scene spread out before him. The sun had set, but high cloud-banks reflected its light, giving a spectral glow to the landscape.

Immediately before him stretched the equivalent of two or three empty blocks, but beyond that began a strange realm that seemed to have been plucked from another climate and another geological system and set down here outside the city. There were strange trees and shrubs, but, most striking of all, great uneven blocks of reddish stone which rose from the earth at unequal intervals and culminated in a massive central eminence fifty or sixty feet high.

As he gazed, the light drained from the landscape, as if a cloak had been flipped over the earth, and in the sudden twilight there rose from somewhere in the region ahead a faint howling, mournful and sinister, but in no way allied to the other howling that had haunted him day and night. Once again he moved forward, but now impulsively toward the source of the new sound.

A small gate in a high wire fence pushed open, giving him access to the realm of rocks. He found himself following a gravel path between thick shrubs and trees. At first it seemed quite dark, in contrast to the open land behind him. And with every step he took, the hollow howling grew closer. Finally the path turned abruptly around a shoulder of rock, and he found himself at the sound's source.

A ditch of rough stone about eight feet wide and of similar depth separated him from a space overgrown with short, brownish vegetation and closely surrounded on the other three sides by precipitous, rocky walls in which were the dark mouths of two or three caves. In the center of the open space were gathered a half dozen white-furred canine figures, their muzzles pointing toward the sky, giving voice to the mournful cry that had drawn him here.

It was only when he felt the low iron fence against his knees and made out the neat little sign reading, ARCTIC WOLVES, that he realized where he must be—in the famous zoological gardens which he had heard about but never visited, where the animals were kept in as nearly natural conditions as was feasible. Looking around, he noted the outlines of two or three low inconspicuous buildings, and some distance away he could see

the form of a uniformed guard silhouetted against a patch of dark sky. Evidently he had come in after hours and through an auxiliary gate that should have been locked.

Swinging around again, he stared with casual curiosity at the wolves. The turn of events had the effect of making him feel stupid and bewildered, and for a long time he pondered dully as to why he should find these animals unalarming and even attractive.

Perhaps it was because they were so much a part of the wild, so little of the city. That great brute there, for instance, the biggest of the lot, who had come forward to the edge of the ditch to stare back at him. He seemed an incarnation of primitive strength. His fur so creamy white – well, perhaps not so white; it seemed darker than he had thought at first, streaked with black or was that due to the fading light? But at least his eyes were clear and clean, shining faintly like jewels in the gathering dark. But no, they weren't clean; their reddish gleam was thickening, scumming over, until they looked more like two tiny peepholes in the walls of a choked furnace. And why hadn't he noticed before that the creature was obviously malformed? And why should the other wolves draw away from it and snarl as if afraid?

Then the brute licked its black tongue across its greasy jowls, and from its throat came a faint familiar growl that had in it nothing of the wild, and David Lashley knew that before him crouched the monster of his dreams, finally made flesh and blood.

With a choked scream he turned and fled blindly down the gravel path that led between thick shrubs to the little gate, fled in panic across empty blocks, stumbling over the uneven ground and twice falling. When he reached the fringe of trees he looked back, to see a low, lurching form emerge from the gate. Even at this distance he could tell that the eyes were those of no animal.

It was dark in the trees, and dark in the lane beyond. Ahead the street lamps glowed, and there were lights in the houses. A pang of helpless terror gripped him when he saw there was no street car waiting, until he realized –and the realization was like the onset of insanity -that nothing whatever in the city promised him refuge. This- everything that lay ahead was the thing's hunting ground It was driving him in toward its lair for the kill.

Then he ran, ran with the hopeless terror of a victim in the

arena, of a rabbit loosed before greyhounds, ran until his sides were walls of pain and his grasping throat seemed aflame, and then still ran. Over mud, dirt and brick, and then onto the endless sidewalks. Past the neat suburban dwellings which in their uniformity seemed like monoliths lining some avenue of Egypt. The streets were almost empty, and those few people he passed stared at him as at a madman.

Brighter lights came into view, a corner with two or three stores. There he paused to look back. For a moment he saw nothing. Then it emerged from the shadows a block behind him, loping unevenly with long strides that carried it forward with a rush, its matted fur shining oilily under a street lamp. With a croaking sob he turned and ran on.

The thing's howling seemed suddenly to increase a thousandfold, becoming a pulsating wail, a screaming ululation that seemed to blanket the whole city with sound. And as that demoniac screeching continued, the lights in the houses began to go out one by one. Then the streetlights vanished in a rush, and an approaching street car was blotted out, and he knew that the sound did not come altogether or directly from the thing. This was the long-predicted blackout.

He ran on with arms outstretched, feeling rather than seeing the intersections as he approached them, misjudging his step at curbs, tripping and falling flat, picking himself up to stagger on half-stunned. His diaphragm contracted to a knot of pain that tied itself tighter and tighter. Breath rasped like a file in his throat. There seemed no light in the whole world, for the clouds had gathered thicker and thicker ever since sunset. No light, except those twin points of dirty red in the blackness behind.

A solid edge of darkness struck him down, inflicting pain on his shoulder and side. He scrambled up. Then a second solid obstacle in his path smashed him full in the face and chest. This time he did not rise. Dazed, tortured by exhaustion, motionless, he waited its approach.

First a padding of footsteps, with the faint scraping of claws on cement. Then a snuffing. Then a sickening stench. Then a glimpse of red eyes And then the thing was upon him, its weight pinning him down, its jaws thrusting at his throat. Instinctively his head went up, and his forearm was clamped by teeth whose icy sharpness stung through the layers of cloth, while a foul oily fluid splattered his face.

At that moment light flooded them, and he was aware of a

malformed muzzle retreating into the blackness, and of weight lifted from him. Then silence and cessation of movement. Nothing, nothing at all—except the light flooding down. As consciousness and sanity teetered in his brain, his eyes found the source of light, a glaring white disk only a few feet away. A flashlight, but nothing visible in the blackness behind it. For what seemed an eternity, there was no change in the situation - himself supine and exposed upon the ground in the unwavering circle of light.

Then a voice from the darkness, the voice of a man paralyzed by supernatural fear. "God, God, God," over and over again. Each word dragged out with prodigious effort.

An unfamiliar sensation stirred in David, a feeling almost of security and relief.

"You—saw it then?" he heard issue from his own dry throat. "The hound? the—wolf?"

"Hound? Wolf?" The voice from behind the flashlight was hideously shaken. "It was nothing like that. It was " Then the voice broke, became earthly once more "Good grief, man, we must get you inside."

Diary in the Snow

Jan. 6: Two hours since my arrival at Lone Top, and I'm still sitting in front of the fire, soaking in the heat. The taxi ride was hellishly cold and the breathtaking half-mile tramp through the drifts with John completed my transformation to an icicle. The driver from Terrestrial told me this was one of the loneliest spots in Montana, and it surely looked like it miles and miles of tenantless, starlit snow with mysterious auroral splotches and ghostly beams flickering to the north– a beautiful, if frightening sight.

And I've even turned the cold to account! It suggested to me that I put my monsters on a drearily frigid planet, one that is circling a dead or dying sun. That will give them a motivation for wanting to invade and capture the Earth. Good!

Well, here I am—a jobless man with a book to write. My friends (such as they are, or were) never believed I'd take this step, and when they finally saw I was in earnest, they tried to convince me I was a fool And toward the end I *was* afraid I'd lose my nerve, but then– it was as if forces beyond my

knowledge or control were packing my bag, insulting my boss, and buying my ticket. A very pleasant illusion, after weeks of qualms and indecision!

How wonderful to be away from people and newspapers and advertisements and movies—all that damnable intellectual static! I confess I had a rather unpleasant shock when I first came in here and noticed the big radio standing right between the fireplace and window. How awful it would be to have that thing blatting at you in this cabin, with no place to escape except the tiny storeroom. It would be worse than the city! But so far John hasn't turned it on, and I have my fingers crossed.

John is a magnificent host understanding as well as incomparably generous. After getting me coffee and a snack, and setting out the whiskey, he's retired to the other armchair and busied himself with some scribbling of his own.

Well, in a moment I'll talk as much as he wants to (*if* he wants to) though I'm still reverberating from my trip. I feel as if I'd been catapulted out of an intolerable clangor and discord into the heart of quietness. It gives me a crazy, lightheaded feeling, like a balloon that touches the earth only to bounce upward again.

Better stop here though. I'd hate to think of how quiet a quietness would have to be, in order to be as much quieter than this place, as this is quieter than the city!

A man ought to be able to listen to his thoughts out here—really *hear* things.

Just John, and me—and my monsters!

Jan. 7: Wonderful day. Crisp, but no wind, and a flood of yellow sunlight to put a warmth and dazzle into the snow banks. John showed me all around the place this morning. It's a snug little cabin he's got, and a good thing too!—because it's quite as lonely as it seemed last night. No houses in sight, and I'd judge there hasn't been anything down the road since my taxi the marks where it turned around stand out sharply. John says a farmer drives by, though, every two days he has an arrangement with him for getting milk and other necessities.

You can't see Terrestrial, there are hills in the way. John tells me that power and telephone wires have never gotten closer than six miles. The radio runs on storage batteries. When the drifts get bad he has to snowshoe all the way into Terrestrial.

I confess I feel a little awestruck at my own temerity—a confirmed desk-worker like myself plunging into a truly rugged

environment like this. But John seems to think nothing of it. He says I'll have to learn to snowshoe. I had my first lesson this morning and cut a ludicrous figure. I'll be virtually a prisoner until I learn my way around. But any price is worth paying to get away from the thought-destroying din and soul-killing routine of the city!

And there's a good side to the enforced isolation -it will make me concentrate on my book.

Well, that does it. I've popped the word. and now I'll have to start writing the thing itself—and am I scared! It's been so long since I've finished anything of my own - even attempted it. So damned long. I'd begun to be afraid (begun, hell!) that I'd never do anything but take notes and make outlines--outlines that became more and more complicated and lifeless with the years And yet there were those early fragments of writing from my school days that ought to have encouraged me. Even much later, when I'd developed some literary judgement, I used to think those fragments showed flashes of real promise -until I burned them They should have given me courage—at any rate, something should have—but whatever promising ideas I'd have in the morning would be shredded to tatters by that horrible hackwriting job by the time night came.

And now that I have taken the plunge, it seems hilariously strange that I should have been driven to it by an idea for a fantasy story The very sort of writing I've always jeered at - childish playing around with interplanetary space and alien monsters. The farthest thing you could imagine from my wearisome outlines, which eventually got so filled up with character analysis (or even Heaven help me psychoanalysis) and dismal authentic backgrounds and "my own experience" and just heaps of social and political "significance" that there wasn't room for anything else. Yes, it does seem ludicrously paradoxical that, instead of all those profound and "important" things, it should have been an idea about black-furred, long-tentacled monsters on another planet, peering unwinkingly at the earth and longing for its warmth and life, that so began to sing in my mind, night and day, that I finally got the strength to sweep aside all those miserable little fences against insecurity I'd been so painfully long in building and take a chance!

John says it's natural and wholesome for a beginning writer to turn to fantasy. And he's certainly made a go of that type of writing himself. (But he's built up his ability as courageously and

doggedly through the years as he has this cabin. In comparison, I have a long, long way to go.)

In any case, my book won't be a cheap romance of the fabulous, despite its "cosmic" background. And when you get down to that, what's wrong with a cosmic background? I've lived a long time now with my monsters and devoted a lot of serious thought to them. I'll make them real.

That night: I just had an exhilaratingly eerie experience. I'd stepped outside for a breather and a look at the snow and stars, when my attention was caught by a beam of violet light some distance away. Though not exactly bright, it had a jewelly gleam and seemed to go up into the sky as far as I could see, without losing any of its needlelike thinness—a very perplexing thing. It was moving around slowly as if it were questing for something. For a shivery moment I had the feeling it came from the stars and was looking for me.

I was about to call John when it winked out. I'm sorry he didn't see it. He tells me it must have been an auroral manifestation, but it certainly didn't look anywhere near that far away--I believe auroras are supposed to be high in the stratosphere, where the air is as rarified as in a fluorescent tube--and besides I always thought they were blotchy. However, I suppose he must be right—he tells me he's seen some very queer ones in past years, and of course my own experience of them is practically nil.

I asked him if there mightn't be some secret military research going on nearby perhaps with atomic power or some new kind of searchlight or radar beam but he scouted the idea.

Whatever it was, it stimulated my imagination. Not that I need it! I'm almost worried by the degree to which my mind has come alive during my few hours at Lone Top. I'm afraid my mind is becoming too keen, like a knife with such a paper-thin edge that it keeps curling over whenever you try to cut something....

Jan. 9: At last, after several false starts, I've made a real beginning I've pictured my monsters holding conclave at the bottom of a fantastically deep crack or canyon in their midnight planet. Except for a thin, jagged-edged ribbon of stars overhead, there is no light --their hoard of radiation is so depleted that ages ago they were forced to stop wasting any of it on the mere luxury of vision. But their strange eyes have become accommodated to starlight (though even they, wise as they are, do not know how to

get any real warmth out of it) and they can perceive each other vaguely—great woolly, spidery shapes crouched on the rocks or draped along the ragged walls. It is unimaginably cold there—their insulating fur is bathed in a frigidity akin to that of interstellar space. They communicate by means of thought—infrequent, well-shaped thoughts, for even thinking uses up energy. They recall their glorious past—their spendthrift youth, their vigorous prime. They commemorate the agony of their eon-long battle against the cold. They reiterate their savage and unshakable determination to survive.

It's a good piece of writing. Even honest John says so, although twitting me sardonically for writing such a wild sort of tale after many years of politely scorning his fantastic stories.

But it was pretty bad for a while there, when I was making those false starts—I began to see myself crawling back in defeat to the grinning city. I can confess now that for years I've been afraid that I never had any real creative ability, that my promising early fragments were just a freak of childhood. Children show flashes of all sorts of odd abilities which they lose when they grow up—eidetic imagery, maybe even clairvoyance, things of that sort. What people praised in those first little stories of mine was a rich human sympathy, an unusually acute insight into adult human motives. And what I was afraid of was that all this had been *telepathy*, an unconscious picking up of snatches of thought and emotion from the adult minds around me—things that sounded very genuine and impressive when written down, especially by a child, but that actually required no more creative ability than taking dictation. I even developed an acute worry that some day I'd find myself doing automatic writing! Odd, what nonsensical fears an artist's mind will cook up when it's going through a dry period—John says it's true of the whole fraternity.

At any rate, the book I'm now writing disposes in a laughably complete fashion of that crazy theory. A story about fabulous monsters on a planet dozens of light-years away can't very well be telepathy!

I suppose it was the broadcast last night that started me thinking again about that silly old notion. The broadcast wasn't silly though—a singularly intelligent discussion of future scientific possibilities—atomic energy, brain waves, new methods of radio transmission, that sort of thing—and not popularized for an oafish audience, thank God. Must be a

program of some local university. John says *now* will I stop disparaging all educational institutions not located in the east!

My first apprehensions about the radio turned out to be completely groundless – I ought to have known that John isn't the sort of person to go in for soap operas and jazz. He uses the instrument intelligently – just a brief daily news summary (*not* a long-winded "commentary"), classical music when available, and an occasionally high-grade lecture or round-table discussion. Last night's scientific broadcast was new to him though – he was out at the time and didn't recognize the station from my description.

I'm rather indebted to that program. I think it was while listening to it that the prologue of my story "jelled." Some chance word or thought provided a crystallization point for my ideas. My mind had become sufficiently fatigued – probably a reaction to my earlier over-keenness – for my churning ideas to settle into place. At any rate, I was suddenly so tired and groggy that I hardly remembered the finish of the program or John coming in or my piling off to bed. John said I looked out on my feet. He thought I'd taken a bit too much, but I referred him to the impartial judgement of the whiskey bottle, and its almost unchanged level refuted the base calumny!

In the morning I woke up fresh as a youngster and ripped off the prologue as if I'd been in the habit of turning out that much writing daily for the past ten years!

Had another snowshoe lesson today and didn't do much better – I grudge all time spent away from my book. John says I really ought to hurry up and learn, in case anything should happen to him while we were cut off from Terrestrial – small chance with reliable John! The radio reports a big blizzard farther east – but so far it hasn't touched us – the sun is bright, the sky dark blue. A local cold snap is predicted.

But what do I care how long I'm confined to the cabin – I have begun to create my monsters!

That night: I'm vindicated! John has just seen my violet beam, confirmed its non-auroral nature, and gone completely overboard as to its nearness – he claimed at first that it was actually hitting the cabin!

He was approaching from the south when he saw it – apparently striking the roof in a corruscation of ghostly violet sparks. He hurried up, calling to me excitedly. It was a moment before I heard him – I'd just caught the mumbly beginning of

what seemed to be another of those interesting scientific broadcasts (must be a series) and was trying to tune in more clearly and having a hard time, the radio being mulish or my own manipulations inadequate.

By the time I got outside the beam had faded We spent several chilly minutes straining our eyes in all directions, but saw nothing except the stars.

John admits now that the beam seeming to strike the roof must have been an optical illusion, but still stoutly insists that it was fairly near. I have become the champion of the auroral theory! For, thinking it over, I can see that the chances are it is some bizarre auroral phenomenon—Arctic and Antarctic explorers, for instance, have reported all sorts of peculiar polar lights. It is very easy to be deceived as to distance in this clear atmosphere, as John himself has said.

Or else who knows? –it might be some unusual form of static electricity, something akin to St. Elmo's fire.

John has been trying to tune in on the program I started to catch, but no soap There seems to be a lot of waily static in that sector of the dial. He informs me in his sardonic way that all sorts of unusual things have begun to happen since my arrival!

John has given up in disgust and is going to bed I think I'll follow his example, though I may have another try at the radio first my old dislike of the brute is beginning to fade, now that it's my only link with the rest of the world.

Next morning -the 10th: We've got the cold snap the radio predicted. I don't notice much difference, except it took longer to get the place warm and everything was a little tightened up. Later on I'm going to help John split firewood--I insisted on it. He enquired with mild maliciousness whether I'd succeeded where he failed at catching the tail-end of that scientific broadcast said the last thing he heard going to sleep was moany static. I admitted that, as far as I knew, I hadn't sleep must have struck the sledge-hammer blow it favors in this rugged locality while I was still twisting the dial; my memories of getting to bed are rather blurry, though I vaguely recall John sleepily snarling at me, "For God's sake turn down the radio."

We did run across one more odd phenomenon, though –or something that could pass for an odd phenomenon with a little grooming. In the middle of breakfast I noticed John looking intently over my shoulder. I turned and after a moment saw that it was something in the frost on the window by the radio. On

closer examination we were considerably puzzled.

There was a queer sinuous pattern in the frost. It was composed of several parallel rows of tiny, roughly triangular humps with faint, hairlike veins going out to either side, all perceptibly thicker than the rest of the frost. I've never seen frost deposited in a pattern like it The nearest analogy that occurs to me—not a very accurate one is a squid's tentacle. For some reason there comes to my mind that description in *King Lear* of a demon glimpsed peering down from a cliff: "Horns whelk'd and wav'd like the enridged sea." I got the impression the pattern had been formed by an object *even colder than the frost* resting lightly against the glass, though that of course is impossible.

I was surprised to hear John say he thought the pattern was in the glass itself, but by scraping off a portion of the frost he did reveal a very faint bluish or lavender pattern which was rather similar.

After discussing various possibilities, we've decided that the cold snap—one of the most sudden in years, John says--brought out a latent imperfection in the glass, touching off some change in molecular organization that absorbed enough heat to account for the difference in thickness of the frost. The same change producing the faint lavender tint--if it wasn't there before.

I feel extraordinarily happy and mentally alive today. All these "odd phenomena" I've been noting down don't really amount to a hoot, except to show that a sense of strangeness, a delightful feeling of adventurous expectancy, has come back into my life—something I thought the city had ground out of me forever, with its blinkered concentration on "practical" matters, its noisy and faddish narrow-mindedness.

Best of all, there is my book I have another scene all shaped in my mind.

Before supper: I've struck a snag. I don't know how I'm going to get my monsters to Earth. I got through the new scene all right it tells how the monsters have for ages been greedily watching the Earth and several other habitable planets that are nearby (in light-years). They have telescopes which do not depend on lenses, but amplify the starlight just as a radio amplifies radio waves or a public address system the human voice. Those telescopes are extraordinarily sensitive—there are no limits to what can be accomplished by selection and amplification—they can see houses and people --they tune in on

wave-lengths that are not distorted by our atmosphere they catch radio-type as well as visual-type waves, and hear our voices—they make use of modes of radiation which our scientists have not yet discovered and which travel at many times the speed of the slower modes, almost instantaneously.

But all this intimate knowledge of our daily life, this interplanetary voyeurism, profits them not in the least, except to whet their appetites to a bitter frenzy. It does not bring them an iota of warmth; on the contrary, it is a steady drain on their radiation bank. And yet they continue to spy minutely on us . . . watching . . . waiting . . . for the right moment.

And that's where the rub comes. Just what is this right moment they are waiting for? How the devil are they ever going to accomplish the trip? I suppose if I were a seasoned science-fiction writer this difficulty wouldn't even faze me—I'd solve it in a wink by means of space-ships or the fourth dimension, or what not. But none of those ideas seem right to me For instance, a few healthy rocket blasts would use up what little energy they have left. I want something that's really plausible.

Oh well, mustn't worry about that—I'll get an idea sooner or later. The important thing is that the writing continues to hold up strongly. John picked up the last few pages for a glance, sat down to read them closely, gave me a sharp look when he'd finished, remarked, "I don't know what *I've* been writing science-fiction for, the past fifteen years," and ducked out to get an armful of wood. Quite a compliment.

Have I started on my real career at last? I hardly dare ask myself, after the many disappointments and blind alleys of those piddling, purposeless city years. And yet even during the blackest periods I used to feel that I was being groomed for some important or at least significant purpose, that I was being tested by moods and miseries, being held back until the right moment came.

An illusion?

Jan. 11: This is becoming very interesting. More odd patterns in the frost and glass this morning a new set But at twenty below it's not to be wondered that inorganic materials get freakish. What an initial drop in temperature accomplished, a further sudden drop might very well repeat. John is quite impressed by it though, and inclined to theorize about obscure points in physics. Wish I could recall the details of last night's scientific broadcast –I think something was said about low

temperature phenomena that might have a bearing on cases like this. But I was dopey as usual and must have dozed through most of it — rather a shame, because the beginning was very intriguing: something about wireless transmission of power and the production of physical effects at far distant points, the future possibilities of some sort of scientific "teleportation." John refers sarcastically to my "private university" — he went to bed early again and missed the program. But he says he half woke at one time and heard me listening to "a lot of nightmarish static" and sleepily implored me either to tune it better or shut it off. Odd — it seemed clear as a bell to me, at least the beginning did, and I don't remember him shouting at all. Probably he was having a nightmare. But I must be careful not to risk disturbing him again. It's funny to think of a confirmed radio-hater like myself in the role of an offensively noise-hungry "fan."

I wonder, though, if my presence is beginning to annoy John. He seemed jumpy and irritable all morning, and suddenly decided to get worried about my pre-bedtime dopeyness. I told him it was the natural result of the change in climate and my unaccustomed creative activity. I'm not used to physical exertion either, and my brief snowshoeing lessons and woodchopping chores, though they would seem trivial to a tougher man, are enough to really fag my muscles. Small wonder if an overpowering tiredness hits me at the end of the day.

But John said he had been feeling unusually sleepy and sluggish himself toward bedtime, and advanced the unpleasant hypothesis of carbon monoxide poisoning — something not to be taken lightly in a cabin sealed as tightly as this. He immediately subjected stove and fireplace to a minute inspection and carefully searched both chimneys for cracks or obstructions, inside and out, despite the truly fiendish cold. I went outside to try and help him, and got a dose of it — brr! The surrounding trackless snowfields looked bright and inviting, but to a man afoot — unless he were a seasoned winter veteran — lethal!

Everything proved to be in perfect order, so our fears were allayed. But John continued to rehearse scare stories of carbon monoxide poisoning, such as the tragic end of Andre's balloon expedition to the Arctic, and remained fidgety and restless — and all of a sudden he decided to snowshoe into Terrestrial for some spare radio parts and other unnecessary oddments. I asked him

wasn't the bi-weekly trudge down to meet the farmer's car enough for him, and why in any case pick the coldest day of the year? But he merely snorted, "That all you know about our weather?" and set out. I'm a bit bothered, though he certainly must know how to take care of himself.

Maybe my presence does upset him. After all, he's lived alone here for years, except for infrequent trips – practically a hermit. Having someone living with him may very well disorder his routine of existence and of creative work completely. Added to that, I'm another writer – a dangerous combination. It's quite possible that, despite our friendship (friendship would have nothing to do with it), I get on his nerves. I must have a long talk with him when he returns and sound him out on this -indirectly, of course.

But now to my monsters. They have a scene that is crying out in my brain to be expressed.

Later. The snag in my writing is developing into a brick wall. I can't seem to figure out *any* plausible way of getting my monsters to Earth. There's a block in my mind whenever I try to think in that direction. I certainly hope it's not going to be the way it was with so many of my early stories -magnificently atmospheric prologues that bogged down completely as soon as I was forced to work out the mechanics of the plot; and the more impressive and evocative the beginning, the more crushing the fall and the more likely it would be to hinge on some trifling detail that persisted in thwarting my inventiveness, such as how to get two characters introduced to each other or how does the hero make a living.

Well, I won't let it defeat me this time! I'll go right ahead with the later portion of the story, and then sooner or later I'll just *have* to think through the snag.

I thought I had the thing licked when I started this noon. I pictured the monsters with a secret outpost established on Earth. Using Earth's energy resources, they are eventually able to work out a means of transporting their entire race here or else dragging off the Earth and Sun to their own dead solar system and sacred home planet across the trackless light-years of interstellar space, like Prometheus stealing fire from heaven, humanity being wiped out in the process.

But, as should have been obvious to me, that still leaves the problem of getting the outpost here.

The section about the outpost looks very good though. Of

course the pioneer monsters will have to keep their presence hidden from humanity while they "try out" our planet, become acclimated to Earth, develop resistance to inimical bacteria strains, et cetera, and measure up man from close range, deciding on the best weapons to use against him when the time for extermination arrives.

For it won't be entirely a one-sided struggle. Man won't be completely powerless against these creatures. For instance, he could probably wipe out the outpost if he ever discovered its existence. But of course that won't happen.

I envisage a number of shivery scenes—people getting glimpses of the monsters in far, lonely places—seeing spidery, shadowy shapes in deep forests coming on hurriedly deserted mountain lairs or encampments that disturbingly suggest neither human beings nor animals—strange black swimmers noted by boats off the usual steamship lanes—engineers and scientists bothered by inexplicable drains on power lines and peculiar thefts of equipment—a vague but mounting general dread—the "irrational" conviction that we are being listened to and spied on, "measured for our coffins" eventually, as the creatures grow bolder, dark polypous forms momentarily seen scuttling across city roofs or clinging to high walls in the more poorly lighted sections, at night—black furry masks pressed for an instant against windowpanes—

Yes, it should work out very nicely.

I wish John would get back though. It's almost dark, and still no sign of him. I've popped out several times for a look-see, but there's nothing except his snowshoe tracks going over the hill. I confess I'm getting a bit edgy. I suppose I've frightened myself with my own story—it wouldn't be the first time that's happened to a writer. I find myself looking quickly at the window, or listening for strange sounds, and my imagination insists on playing around unpleasantly with the "odd phenomena" of the past few days the violet auroral beam, the queer patterns in the frost, my silly notions about telepathic powers. My mental state is extraordinarily heightened and I have the illusion, both pleasurable and frightening, of standing at the doorway of an unknown alien realm and being able to rend the filmy curtain with a twitch of my finger if I choose.

But such nervousness is only natural, considering the isolation of the place and John's delay. I certainly hope he isn't going to snowshoe back in the dark at a temperature like this

any accident or misjudgement might have fatal consequences. And if he did get into trouble I wouldn't be any help to him.

As I get things ready for supper, I keep the radio going. It provides a not unpleasant companionship.

Jan. 12: We had quite a high old time last night. John popped in well past the supper hour—he'd gotten a ride with his farmer. He had a bottle of fantastically high-proof rum with him (he says when you have to pack your liquor, you want as much alcohol and as little water as possible) and after supper we settled down for a long palaver. Oddly I had trouble getting into the spirit of the evening. I was restless and wanted to be fiddling with my writing, or the radio, or something. But the liquor helped to lull such nervous impulses, and after a while we opened our minds to each other and talked about everything under the sun.

One thing I'm glad we settled: any ideas I had about my presence annoying John are pure moonshine. He's pleased to have a comrade out here, and the fact that he's doing me a big favor really makes him feel swell. (It's up to me not to disappoint his generosity.) And if any further proof were needed, he's started a new story this morning (said he's been mulling it in his mind the past couple of days --hence his restlessness) and is typing away at it like sixty!

I feel very normal and down-to-earth this morning. I realize now that during the past few days I have been extraordinarily keyed up, both mentally and imaginatively. It's rather a relief to get over a mental binge like that (with the aid of physical binge!) but also faintly depressing --a strange bloom rubbed off things I find my mind turning to practical matters, such as where am I going to sell my stories and how am I going to earn a living writing when my small savings give out? John and I talked about it for quite a while.

Well, I suppose I should be getting to my writing, though for once I'd rather knock around in the snow with John. The weather's moderated.

Jan. 13—evening: Got to face it my writing has bogged down completely. It's not just the snag—I can't write *anything* on the story. I've torn up so damn many half pages! Not a single word rings true, or even feels true while I'm writing it—it's all fakey. My monsters are miserable puppets or papier-mâché and moth-eaten black fur.

John says not to worry, but *he* can talk that way *his* story is going great guns; he put in a herculean stint of typing today and

just now rolled into bed after a couple of quick drinks.

I took his advice yesterday, spent most of the day outdoors, practicing snowshoeing, chopping wood, et cetera. But it didn't make me feel a bit keener this morning.

I don't think I should have congratulated myself on getting over my "mental binge." It was really my creative energy. Without it, I'm no good at all. It's as if I had been "listening" for my story and contact had been suddenly broken off. I remember having the same experience with some of my earlier writing. You ring and ring, but the other end of the line has gone dead.

I don't think the drinking helps either. We had another bottle session last night—good fun, but it dulls the mind, at least mine. And I don't believe John would have stopped at a couple even this evening, if I hadn't begged off.

I think John is worried about me in a friendly way—considers me a mild neurotic case and dutifully plies me with the more vigorous animal activities, such as snowshoeing and boozing. I catch a clinical look in his eyes, and then there's the way he boosts the "healthy, practical outlook" in our conversations, steers them away from morbid topics.

Of course I'm somewhat neurotic. Every creative artist is. And I did get a bit up in the air when we had our carbon monoxide scare—but so did he! Why the devil should he try to inhibit my imagination? He must know how important it is to me, how crucial, that I finish this story.

Mustn't force myself, though. That's the worst thing. I ought to turn in, but I don't feel a bit sleepy. John's snoring—damn him!

I think I'll fish around on the radio—keep it turned low. I'd like to catch another of those scientific programs—they stimulate my imagination. Wonder where they come from? John brought a couple of papers and I looked through the radio sections, but couldn't find the station.

Jan. 14: I'd give a good deal to know just what's happening here. More odd humpy patterns this morning—there's been another cold snap—and they weren't altogether in the frost. But first there was that crazy dual sleepwalking session. There may be something in John's monoxide theory—at any rate *some* theory is needed.

Late last night I awoke sitting up, still fully clothed, with John shaking me. There was a frozen, purposeful look on his face, but his eyes were closed. It was a few moments before I

could make him stop pushing at me. At first he was confused, almost antagonistic, but after a while he woke up completely and told me that he had been having a fearful nightmare.

It began, he said, with an unpleasant moaning, wailing sound that had been torturing his ears for hours. Then he seemed to wake up and see the room, but it was changed — it was filled with violet sparks that showered and fell and rose again, ceaselessly. He felt an extreme chill, as of interstellar space. He was seized by the fear that something horrible was trying to get into the cabin. He felt that somehow *I* was letting it in, unknowingly, and that he must get to me and make me stop, but his limbs were held down as if by huge weights. He remembers making an agonizing, protracted effort.

For my part, I must have fallen asleep at the radio. It was turned on low, but not tuned to any station.

The sources of his nightmare are pretty obvious: the violet auroral beam, the "nightmarish" (prescient!) static of a few evenings ago, the monoxide fear, his partially concealed worry about me, and finally the rather heavy drinking we've both been doing. In fact, the whole business is nothing so terribly out of the way, except for the tracks — and how, or why, they should tie in with the sleepwalking session I haven't the ghost of an idea.

They were the same pattern as before, but much thicker—great ridgy welts of ice. And I had the odd illusion that they exuded a cold more intense than that of the rest of the frost. When we had scraped them away—a difficult job—we saw that the glass reproduced the pattern more distinctly and in a more pronounced hue. But strangest of all, we have traced what certainly seems to be a faint continuation on the inner windowsill, where the tracks take the form of a cracking and *disintegration* of the paint—it flakes off at a touch and the flakes, faintly lavender, crumble to powder. We also think we've found another continuation on the back of the chair by the window, though that is problematic.

What can have produced them is completely beyond us. Conceivably one of us might have "faked" them in some bizarre sleepwalking state, but how? — there's no object in the cabin that could produce that sinuous, chainy pattern with hairlike border. And even if there were, how could we possibly use it to produce a ridged pattern? Or is it possible that John is engineering an elaborate practical joke — no, it couldn't be anything like that!

We carefully inspected the other windows, including the one

in the storeroom, but found no similar patterns.

John is planning to remove the pane eventually and submit it to a physicist for examination. He is very worked up about the thing. I can't quite make him out. He almost seems frightened. A few minutes ago he vaguely suggested something about our going into Terrestrial and rooming there for a few days.

But that would be ridiculous. I'm sure there's nothing inexplicable about this business. Even the matter of the tracks must have some very simple explanation that we would see at once if we were trained physicists.

I, for one, am going to forget all about it. My mind's come alive on the story again and I'm itching to write. Nothing must get in the way.

After supper: I feel strangely nervous, although my writing is going well again, thank God! I think I've licked the snag! I still don't see how I'm going to get my monsters to the Earth, but I have the inward conviction that the right method will suddenly pop into my mind when the time comes. Irrational, but the feeling is strong enough to satisfy me completely

Meanwhile I'm writing the sections immediately before and after the first monster's arrival on Earth—creeping up on the event from both sides! The latter section is particularly effective. I show the monster floundering around in the snow (he naturally chooses to arrive in a cold region, since that would be the least unlike the climate of his own planet). I picture his temporary bewilderment at Earth's radiation storms, his awkward but swift movements, his hurried search for a suitable hiding place. An ignorant oaf glimpses him or his tracks, tells what he has seen, is laughed at for a superstitious fool. Perhaps, though, the monster is forced to kill someone....

Odd that I should see all that so clearly and still be completely blind as to the section immediately preceding. But I'm convinced I'll know tomorrow!

John picked up the last pages, put them down after a moment. "Too damned realistic!" he observed.

I should be pleased, and yet now that I'm written out for the day I suddenly find myself apprehensive and —yes—frightened. My tired, overactive mind persists in playing around in a morbid way with the events of last night. I tell myself I'm just frightening myself with my story, "pretending" that it's true—as an author will—and carrying the pretense a little too far.

But I'm very much afraid that there's more to it than that—some actual thing or influence that we don't understand.

For instance, on rereading my previous entries in this diary, I find that I have omitted several important points—as if my unconscious mind were deliberately trying to suppress them.

For one thing, I failed to mention that the color in the glass and on the windowsill was identical with that of the violet beam.

Perhaps there is a natural connection the beam a bizarre form of static electricity and the track its imprint, like lightning and the marks it produces.

This hint of a scientific explanation ought to relieve me, I suppose, but it doesn't.

Secondly, there's the feeling that John's nightmare was somehow partly real.

Thirdly, I said nothing about our instant fear, as soon as we first saw the patterns in the frost, that they had been produced by some, well, creature, though how a creature could be colder than its environment, I don't know. John said nothing, but I knew he had exactly the same idea as I: that a groping something had rested its chilled feeler against the windowpane.

The fear reached its highest pitch this morning. We still hadn't opened our minds to each other, but as soon as we had examined the tracks, we both started, as if by unspoken agreement, to wander around. It was like that scene reproduced so often in movies—two rivals are looking for the girl who is the object of their affections and who has coyly gone off somewhere. They begin to amble around silently, upstairs and down, indoors and out. Every once in a while they meet, start back a bit, nod, and pass each other by without a word.

That's how it was with John and me and our "creature." It wasn't at all amusing.

But we found nothing.

I can tell that John is as bothered by all this as I am. However, we don't talk about it –our ideas aren't of the sort that lend themselves to reasonable conversation.

He says one thing—that he wants to see me in bed first tonight. He's taking no chances of a repetition of the events that led up to the sleepwalking session. I'm certainly agreeable—I don't relish an experience like that any more than he does.

If only we weren't so damnably isolated! Of course, we could always get into Terrestrial at a pinch --unless a blizzard cut us off. The weatherman hints at such a possibility in the next few days.

John has kept the radio going all day, and I must confess I'm wholeheartedly grateful. Even the inanest program creates an

illusion of social companionship and keeps the imagination from wandering too far.

I wish we were both in the city.

Jan. 15: This business has taken a disagreeable turn. We are planning to get out today.

There is a hostile, murderous being in the cabin, or somehow able to enter it at will without disturbing a locked door and tight-frozen windows. It is something unknown to science and alien to life as we know it. It comes from some realm of eternal cold.

I fully understand the extraordinary implications of those words. I would not put them down if I did not think they were true.

Or else we are up against an unknown natural force that behaves so like a hostile, murderous being that we dare not treat it otherwise.

We are waiting for the farmer's car, will ride back with him. We considered making the trip afoot, setting out at once, but John's injury and my inexperience decided us against it.

We have had another sleepwalking session, only this one did not end so innocuously.

It began, so far as we are able to reconstruct, with John's nightmare, which was an exact repetition of the one he had the night before, except that all the feelings, John says, were intensified.

Similarly, my first conscious sensations were of John shaking me and pushing at me. Only this time the room was in darkness, except for red glints from the fireplace.

Our struggle was much more violent. A chair was overturned. We slewed around, slammed against the wall, the radio slid to the floor with a crash.

Then John quieted. I hurried to light the lamp.

As I turned back, I heard him grunt with pain.

He was staring stupidly at his right wrist.

Encircling it like a double bracelet, deeply indenting it, were marks, like those in the frost.

The indented flesh was purplish and caked with frozen blood.

The flesh to either side of the indentation was white, cold to my touch, and covered with fine hairlike marks of the same violet hue as in the beam and the glass.

It was a minute before the crystals of blood melted.

We disinfected and bandaged the wound. Swabbing with the disinfectant had no effect on the violet hairlines.

Then we searched the cabin without result, and while waiting

for morning, decided on our present plans.

We have tried and tried to reconstruct what else happened. Presumably I got up in my sleep—or else John pulled me out of bed—but then . . . ?

I wish I could get rid of the feeling that I am unconsciously in league with the being or force that injured John—trying to let it in.

Strangely, I am just as eager as yesterday to get at my writing. I have the feeling that once I got started, I would be past the snag in no time. Under the circumstances, the feeling disgusts me. Truly, creative ability fattens on horror in a most inhuman fashion.

The farmer's car should be here any minute. It looks dark outside. I wish we could get a weather broadcast, but the radio is out of commission.

Later: Can't possibly get away today. A tremendous blizzard literally burst on us a few minutes after I finished writing the last entry. John tells me he was almost certain it was coming, but hoped it would miss us at the last moment. No chance of the farmer now.

The fury of the storm would frighten me, were it not for the other thing. The beams creak. The wind screams and roars, sucking heat out of the place. A freakishly heavy gust just now came down the fireplace chimney, scattering embers. We are keeping a bigger fire in the stove, which draws better. Though barely sunset, we can see nothing outside, except the meager reflections of our lights on the blasts and eddies of snow.

John has been busy repairing the radio, despite his bad hand—we must find out how long the storm is expected to last. Although I know next to nothing of the mechanism, I have been helping him by holding things.

Now that we have no alternative but to stay here, we feel less panicky. Already the happenings of last night are beginning to seem incredible, remote. Of course, there must be some unknown force loose in this vicinity, but now that we are on guard, it is unlikely that it can harm us again. After all, it has only showed itself while we were both asleep, and we are planning to stay awake tonight—at least one of us. John wants to watch straight through. I protested because of his wounded hand, but he says it doesn't hurt much—just a dull throb. It isn't badly swollen. He says it still feels as though it were faintly anaesthetized by ice.

On the whole the storm and the sense of physical danger it

brings have had a stimulating effect on me. I feel eager to be doing something. That inappropriate urge to be working at my story keeps plaguing me.

Evening: About to turn in for a while. All of a sudden feel completely washed up. But, thank Heaven, the radio is going at last. Some ultra-inane program, but it steadies me. Weather report that the blizzard may be over tomorrow. John is in good spirits and on the alert. The axe—best weapon we can muster—leans against his chair.

Next day Must put down coherent record events just as happened. *May need it* -though even if accused, don't see how they can explain how I made the marks.

Must stay in cabin! Blizzard means *certain* death. *It* can be escaped from—possibly.

Mustn't panic again. Think I escaped serious frostbite. No question about sprained or badly strained ankle. No one could get to Terrestrial. Crazy for me to try. Merest luck I found the cabin. Must keep myself in hand. Must! Even if it is here watching me.

To begin, last night. First—confused dreams snow and black spidery monsters—reflection of my book. Second sleepwalking blackness and violet sparks—John—violent surging movements—falling through space breath of searing cold crash sudden pain flood of white sparks blackout.

Third -this morning. Weak—terribly feverish -staring at wall—pattern in grain of wood—*familiar*—pattern jumped to nearer surface John's head and back no surprise or horror, at first—muttered, "John's sick too. Gone to sleep on the floor, like me."—*recognized pattern.*

Worked over him an hour—longer hopeless—skull eaten in—hair dissolved—falls to powder at touch—violet lines—track twisted downward -shirt eaten through -spine laid bare -flesh near track snow white and icy to touch, much colder than cabin—trembling all the while, partly from cold—blizzard still raging both fires out got them going -searched cabin John's body into storeroom -covered—coffee—crazy itch to write tried to work on smashed radio—had to keep doing something—hands moving faster and faster—began to tremble—more and more—threw on clothes—strapped on snowshoes out into the blizzard -full force of wind—knocked down twice—tried to go on by crouching—snowshoes tangled down a third time pain—struggled like something'd caught

me—more pain lay still—face lashed by ice—had to get back—crawled—crawled forever—no feeling—glimpsed open door of cabin, *behind* me—made it—

I must keep control of myself. I must keep my thoughts logical. Reconstruct!

John asleep. What made him sleep? Meanwhile, am I letting the thing in? How? He starts up suddenly. Struggles with the thing and me. Knocks me down. Is caught like Laocoon. Strikes with the axe. Misses. Hits the radio. No chance for a second blow. Squeezed, frozen, corroded to death.

Then? I was helpless. Why did it stop?

Is it sure of me and saving me for tonight? Or does it need me? At times I have the crazy feeling that the story I have been writing is true—that one of my monsters killed John—that I am trying to help them reach the Earth.

But that's mental weakness an attempt to rationalize the incredible. This is not fantasy it's *real*. I must fight any such trends toward insanity.

I must make plans. As long as the blizzard lasts, I'm trapped here. It will try to get me tonight. I must keep awake. When the blizzard lifts, I can try smoke signals. Or, if my ankle improves, attempt it to Terrestrial along the road. The farmer ought to be coming by, though John did say that when the roads are blocked—

John—

If only I weren't so completely alone. If only I had the radio.

Later: Got the radio going! A miracle of luck I must have absorbed more knowledge than I realized, helping fix it yesterday. My fingers moved nimbly, as if they remembered more than my conscious mind, and pretty soon I had all the smashed parts replaced with spares.

It was good to hear those first voices.

The blizzard will end tonight, it is predicted.

I feel considerably reassured. I fully realize the dangers of the coming night, but I believe that with luck I'll be able to escape them.

My emotions are exhausted. I think I can face whatever comes, coolly and calmly.

I would be completely confident except for that persistent, unnerving feeling that a segment of my unconscious mind is under the control of something outside myself.

My chief fear is that I will yield to some sudden irrational

impulse, such as the urge to write, which at times becomes incomprehensibly intense– I feel I *must* complete the "snag section" of my story.

Such impulses may be traps, to get me off guard.

I'll listen to the radio. Hope I find a good, steadying program

That fantastic urge to finish my story!

(The first lines of the next entry in Alderman's diary are wholly unintelligible—a frantic, automatic scribbling done in great haste. At several places the penpoint has penetrated the paper. Abruptly the message becomes coherent, although the writing speed seems, if anything, to increase. The transition is startling, as though a gibbering lunatic had suddenly put on the glib semblance of sanity. The change in person is also noteworthy, and obviously related to the last line of the preceding entry.)

The spider-creature noted that contact had been reestablished and coolly asked for more power, although it meant draining the last reserves. It would not do to undershoot the mark this time—there was not enough left for another attempt.

They should succeed, however. The interfering biped had been eliminated, and the other biped was responding beautifully.

How long this moment had been anticipated! How many eons had been spent waiting for the emergence of sufficiently intelligent animals on that faraway planet and their development of adequate radiation excitors—maddeningly slow processes even with telepathic urging! How long, too, at the end, it had taken to select and mold one of the bipeds into a suitably sensitive subject! For a while it had seemed that he was going to escape them by hiding among the crude thought-storms of his duller fellows, but at last he had been tempted into the open. Conditions were right for the establishment of that delicate admixture of physical and mental radiations which opened the door between the stars and built the web across the cosmic chasms.

And now the spider-creature was halfway across that web. Five times already he had crossed it, only to be repulsed at the very end. He must not fail this time. The fate of the world hung on it.

The tractable biped's mind was becoming restive, though not as yet to an alarming degree. Because his conscious mind could

not bear the reality of what he was doing, the biped was inscribing it as a fictional account—his customary rationalization.

And now the spider-creature was across the bridge. His transmuted flesh tingled as it began to reassemble, shuddered at the first radiation blasts of this raw, hot planet. It was like being reborn.

The biped's mind was in turmoil. Obviously the crasser, planet-tethered portion of it was straining to gain control and would soon over-power the more sensitive segment—but not soon enough. Dispassionately the spider-creature scanned it and noted: an almost unendurable horror, the intent to set fire to its habitation with an inflammable oil in an effort to injure the invader (that was good—it would destroy evidence), and the further intent to flee as soon as it regained control of its body (that must be prevented the biped must be overtaken and eliminated; its story would not be believed, but alive it constituted a danger, nevertheless).

The spider-creature broke free, its crossing accomplished. As the mental portion of it underwent the final transformation, it felt its control of the biped's mind snap and it prepared for pursuit.

At that first moment of exultation, however, it felt a twinge of pity for the small, frantic, doomed animal that had helped alter so signally the destiny of its planet.

It could so easily have saved itself. It had only to have resisted one of the telepathic promptings. It had only to have maintained its previous detestation of the voice of the herd. It had only not to have undone the work of defensive sabotage its comrade, in dying, had achieved. It had only not to have repaired the radio.

Final Comment by Willard P. Cronin, M.D., Terrestrial, Montana: The fire at John Wendle's residence was noted at 3:00 A.M. on the morning of January 17th, shortly after the blizzard ended. I was a member of the party that immediately set out to render aid, and was among the first to sight the gutted cabin. In its ruin was discovered a single, badly-charred body, later identified as that of Wendle. There were indications that the fire had been started by the deliberate smashing of a kerosene lamp.

It should be obvious to any rational person that Thomas Alderman's "diary" is the work of an insane mind, and almost

certainly fabricated in an effort to shift to other and fabulous shoulders the guilt for a murderous crime, which he also sought to conceal entirely—by arson.

Interrogation of Alderman's former city associates confirms the picture of a weak-minded and antisocial dreamer, a miserable failure in his vocation. Very possibly the motive for his crime was jealousy of a fellow hackwriter who, although his stories were largely a puerile bilge of pseudoscience designed for immature minds, had at least some small financial success. As for the similarly childish "story" that Alderman claimed to be writing, there is no evidence that it even existed, though it is impossible, of course, to disprove that it did indeed exist and was destroyed in the fire.

Most unfortunately, some of the more lurid details of the "diary" have been noised around in Terrestrial, giving rise to scare stories among the more ignorant and credulous inhabitants.

It is equally unfortunate that an uneducated and superstitious miner named Evans, a member of the rescue party and of the group that followed Alderman's footprints away from the charred cabin, should have strayed from that group and shortly returned in panic with a wild account of having found a set of "big, sprawly, ropey tracks" paralleling Alderman's trail. Doubly unfortunate that a sudden resumption of the snowfall prevented his yarn from being disproved by such visual evidence as even the most brutish minds must accept.

It is no use pointing out to such low-grade mentalities that no reputable citizen of Terrestrial has seen anything in the least out of the ordinary in the snowfields, that no unusual auroras whatever have been reported by meteorologists, and that there were no radio broadcasts which could possibly have agreed, either in hour or content, with those "scientific programs" of which Alderman made so much.

With the exasperating and ludicrous consistency characteristic of epidemics of mass hallucination, stories of "strange tracks" in the snow and distant fleeting glimpses of "a big black spidery thing" continue to trickle in.

One wishes, with an understandably angry fervor, that the whole episode could have had the satisfying and all-decisive conclusion that the public trial of Thomas Alderman would have provided.

That, however, was not to be. About two miles from the

cabin, the group following Alderman's footprints came upon his body in the snow. The expression on his frozen face was sufficient in itself to prove his insanity. One stiff hand, half buried in the snow, clutched the notebook containing the "diary." On the back of the other, which was clapped to his frosted eyes, was something that, although furnishing more fuel for the delusions of morons like Evans, provides the educated and scientific intellect with a clue as to the source of one of the more bizarre details in Alderman's fabrication.

This thing on the back of his hand obviously must have been a crude bit of tattooing, though so old and inexpertly done that the characteristic punctures and discrete dye granules were not apparent.

A few wavy violet lines.

The Girl With The Hungry Eyes

ALL RIGHT, I'LL tell you why the Girl gives me the creeps. Why I can't stand to go downtown and see the mob slavering up at her on the tower, with that pop bottle or pack of cigarettes or whatever it is beside her Why I hate to look at magazines any more because I know she'll turn up somewhere in a brassiere or a bubble bath Why I don't like to think of millions of Americans drinking in that poisonous half-smile. It's quite a story more story than you're expecting.

No, I haven't suddenly developed any long-haired indignation at the evils of advertising and the national glamour-girl complex. That'd be a laugh for a man in my racket, wouldn't it? Though I think you'll agree there's something a little perverted about trying to capitalize on sex that way. But it's okay with me. And I know we've had the Face and the Body and the Look and what not else, so why shouldn't someone come along who sums it all up so completely, that we have to call her the Girl and blazon her on all the billboards from Times Square to Telegraph Hill?

But the Girl isn't like any of the others. She's unnatural. She's morbid. She's unholy.

Oh it's 1948, is it, and the sort of thing I'm hinting at went out with witchcraft? But you see I'm not altogether sure myself what I'm hinting at, beyond a certain point. There are vampires and vampires, and not all of them suck blood.

And there were the murders, if they were murders.

Besides, let me ask you this. Why, when America is obsessed with the Girl, don't we find out more about her? Why doesn't she rate a *Time* cover with a droll biography inside? Why hasn't there been a feature in *Life* or the *Post*? A Profile in the *New Yorker*? Why hasn't *Charm* or *Mademoiselle* done her career saga? Not ready for it? Nuts!

Why haven't the movies snapped her up? Why hasn't she been on Information, Please? Why don't we see her kissing candidates at political rallies? Why isn't she chosen queen of some sort of junk or other at a convention?

Why don't we read about her tastes and hobbies, her views of the Russian situation? Why haven't the columnists interviewed her in a kimono on the top floor of the tallest hotel in Manhattan and told us who her boyfriends are?

Finally—and this is the real killer—why hasn't she ever been drawn or painted?

Oh, no she hasn't. If you knew anything about commercial art you'd know that. Every blessed one of those pictures was worked up from a photograph. Expertly? Of course. They've got the top artists on it. But that's how it's done.

And now I'll tell you the *why* of all that. It's because from the top to the bottom of the whole world of advertising, news, and business, there isn't a solitary soul who knows where the Girl came from, where she lives, what she does, who she is, even what her name is.

You heard me. What's more, not a single solitary soul ever *sees* her—except one poor damned photographer, who's making more money off her than he ever hoped to in his life and who's scared and miserable as Hell every minute of the day.

No, I haven't the faintest idea who he is or where he has his studio. But I know there has to be such a man and I'm morally certain he feels just like I *said*.

Yes, I might be able to find her, if I tried. I'm not sure though by now she probably has other safeguards. Besides, I don't want to.

Oh, I'm off my rocker, am I? That sort of thing can't happen in this Year of our Atom 1948? People can't keep out of sight that way, not even Garbo?

Well I happen to know they can, because last year I was that poor damned photographer I was telling you about. Yes, last year, in 1947, when the Girl made her first poisonous splash right here in this big little city of ours.

Yes, I knew you weren't here last year and you don't know about it. Even the Girl had to start small. But if you hunted through the files of the local newspapers, you'd find some ads, and I might be able to locate you some of the old displays—I think Lovelybelt is still using one of them. I used to have a mountain of photos myself, until I burned them.

Yes, I made my cut off her. Nothing like what that other photographer must be making, but enough so it still bought this whisky. She was funny about money. I'll tell you about that.

But first picture me in 1947. I had a fourth floor studio in that rathole the Hauser Building, catty-corner from Ardleigh Park.

I'd been working at the Marsh-Mason studios until I'd got my bellyful of it and decided to start in for myself. The Hauser Building was crummy I'll never forget how the stairs creaked but it was cheap and there was a skylight.

Business was lousy. I kept making the rounds of all the advertisers and agencies, and some of them didn't object to me too much personally, but my stuff never clicked. I was pretty near broke. I was behind on my rent. Hell, I didn't even have enough money to have a girl.

It was one of those dark grey afternoons. The building was awfully quiet even with the shortage they can't half rent the Hauser. I'd just finished developing some pix I was doing on speculation for Lovelybelt Girdles and Buford's Pool and Playground—the last a faked-up beach scene. My model had left. A Miss Leon. She was a civics teacher at one of the high schools and modelled for me on the side, just lately on speculation too. After one look at the prints, I decided that Miss Leon probably wasn't just what Lovelybelt was looking for —or my photography either. I was about to call it a day.

And then the street door slammed four storeys down and there were steps on the stairs and she came in.

She was wearing a cheap, shiny black dress. Black pumps. No stockings. And except that she had a grey cloth coat over one of them, those skinny arms of hers were bare. Her arms are pretty

skinny, you know, or can you see things like that any more?

And then the thin neck, the slightly gaunt, almost prim face, the tumbling mass of dark hair, and looking out from under it the hungriest eyes in the world.

That's the real reason she's plastered all over the country today, you know those eyes. Nothing vulgar, but just the same they're looking at you with a hunger that's all sex and something more than sex. That's what everybody's been looking for since the Year One—something a little more than sex.

Well, boys, there I was, along with the Girl, in an office that was getting shadowy, in a nearly empty building. A situation that a million male Americans have undoubtedly pictured to themselves with various lush details. How was I feeling? Scared.

I know sex can be frightening. That cold, heart-thumping when you're alone with a girl and feel you're going to touch her. But if it was sex this time, it was overlaid with something else.

At least I wasn't thinking about sex.

I remember that I took a backward step and that my hand jerked so that the photos I was looking at sailed to the floor.

There was the faintest dizzy feeling like something was being drawn out of me. Just a little bit.

That was all. Then she opened her mouth and everything was back to normal for a while.

"I see you're a photographer, mister," she said. "Could you use a model?"

Her voice wasn't very cultivated.

"I doubt it," I told her, picking up the pix. You see, I wasn't impressed. The commerical possibilities of her eyes hadn't registered on me yet, by a long shot. "What have you done?"

Well she gave me a vague sort of story and I began to check her knowledge of model agencies and studios and rates and what not and pretty soon I said to her, "Look here, you never modelled for a photographer in your life. You just walked in here cold."

Well, she admitted that was more or less so.

All along through our talk I got the idea she was feeling her way, like someone in a strange place. Not that she was uncertain of herself, or of me, but just of the general situation.

"And you think anyone can model?" I asked her pityingly.

"Sure," she said.

"Look," I said, "a photographer can waste a dozen negatives

trying to get one halfway human photo of an average woman How many do you think he'd have to waste before he got a real catchy, glamorous pix of her?"

"I think I could do it," she said.

Well, I should have kicked her out right then. Maybe I admired the cool way she stuck to her dumb little guns. Maybe I was touched by her underfed look. More likely I was feeling mean on account of the way my pix had been snubbed by everybody and I wanted to take it out on her by showing her up.

"Okay, I'm going to put you on the spot," I told her. "I'm going to try a couple of shots of you. Understand, it's strictly on spec. If somebody should ever want to use a photo of you, which is about one chance in two million, I'll pay you regular rates for your time. Not otherwise."

She gave me a smile. The first. "That's swell by me," she said.

Well, I took three or four shots, close-ups of her face since I didn't fancy her cheap dress, and at least she stood up to my sarcasm. Then I remembered I still had the Lovelybelt stuff and I guess the meanness was still working in me because I handed her a girdle and told her to go behind the screen and get into it and she did, without getting flustered as I'd expected, and since we'd gone that far I figured we might as well shoot the beach scene to round it out, and that was that.

All this time I wasn't feeling anything particular in one way or the other except every once in a while I'd get one of those faint dizzy flashes and wonder if there was something wrong with my stomach or if I could have been a bit careless with my chemicals

Still, you know, I think the uneasiness was in me all the while.

I tossed her a card and pencil. "Write your name and address and phone," I told her and made for the darkroom.

A little later she walked out. I didn't call any good-byes I was irked because she hadn't fussed around or seemed anxious about her poses, or even thanked me, except for that one smile.

I finished developing the negatives, made some prints, glanced at them, decided they weren't a great deal worse than Miss Leon. On an impulse I slipped them in with the pix I was going to take on the rounds next morning.

By now I'd worked long enough so I was a bit fagged and nervous, but I didn't dare waste enough money on liquor to help that. I wasn't very hungry I think I went to a cheap movie.

I didn't think of the Girl at all, except maybe to wonder

faintly why in my present womanless state I hadn't made a pass at her. She had seemed to belong to a, well, distinctly more approachable social stratum than Miss Leon. But then of course there were all sorts of arguable reasons for my not doing that.

Next morning I made the rounds. My first step was Munsch's Brewery. They were looking for a "Munsch Girl." Papa Munsch had a sort of affection for me, though he razzed my photography. He had a good natural judgment about that, too. Fifty years ago he might have been one of the shoestring boys who made Hollywood.

Right now he was out in the plant pursuing his favorite occupation. He put down the beaded can, smacked his lips, gabbled something technical to someone about hops, wiped his fat hands on the big apron he was wearing, and grabbed my thin stack of pix.

He was about halfway through, making noises with his tongue and teeth, when he came to her. I kicked myself for even having stuck her in.

"That's her," he said. "The photography's not so hot, but that's the girl."

It was all decided. I wondered now why Papa Munsch sensed what the girl had right away, while I didn't. I think it was because I saw her first in the flesh, if that's the right word.

At the time I just felt faint.

"Who is she?" he asked.

"One of my new models," I tried to make it casual.

"Bring her out tomorrow morning," he told me. "And your stuff We'll photograph her here. I want to show you.

"Here, don't look so sick," he added. "Have some beer "

Well I went away telling myself it was just a fluke, so that she'd probably blow it tomorrow with her inexperience, and so on.

Just the same, when I reverently laid my next stack of pix on Mr. Fitch, of Lovelybelt's, rose-colored blotter, I had her's on top.

Mr. Fitch went through the motions of being an art critic. He leaned over backward, squinted his eyes, waved his long fingers, and said, "Hmm. What do you think, Miss Willow? Here, in this light. Of course the photograph doesn't show the bias cut And perhaps we should use the Lovelybelt Imp instead of the Angel. Still, the girl. . . . Come over here, Binns." More finger-waving. "I want a married man's reaction."

He couldn't hide the fact that he was hooked.

Exactly the same thing happened at Buford's Pool and Playground, except that Da Costa didn't need a married man's say-so.

"Hot stuff," he said, sucking his lips. "Oh, boy, you photographers!"

I hot-footed it back to the office and grabbed up the card I'd given her to put down her name and address.

It was blank.

I don't mind telling you that the next five days were about the worst I ever went through, in an ordinary way. When next morning rolled around and I still hadn't got hold of her, I had to start stalling.

"She's sick," I told Papa Munsch over the phone.

"She at a hospital?" he asked me.

"Nothing that serious," I told him.

"Get her out here then. What's a little headache?"

"Sorry, I can't."

Papa Munsch got suspicious. "You really got this girl?"

"Of course I have."

"Well, I don't know. I'd think it was some New York model, except I recognized your lousy photography."

I laughed.

"Well look, you get her here tomorrow morning, you hear?"

"I'll try."

"Try nothing. You get her out here."

He didn't know half of what I tried. I went around to all the model and employment agencies. I did some slick detective work at the photographic and art studios. I used up some of my last dimes putting advertisements in all three papers. I looked at highschool yearbooks and at employee photos in local house organs. I went to restaurants and drugstores, looking for waitresses, and to dime stores and department stores, looking at clerks. I watched the crowds coming out of movie theatres. I roamed the streets.

Evenings I spent quite a bit of time along Pick-up Row Somehow that seemed the right place.

The fifth afternoon I knew I was licked. Papa Munsch's deadline—he'd given me several, but this was it was due to run out at six o'clock. Mr. Fitch had already cancelled

I was at the studio window, looking out at Ardleigh Park.

She walked in.

I'd gone over this moment so often in my mind that I had no trouble putting on my act. Even the faint dizzy feeling didn't throw me off.

"Hello," I said, hardly looking at her.

"Hello," she said.

"Not discouraged yet?"

"No" It didn't sound uneasy or defiant. It was just a statement.

I snapped a look at my watch, got up and said curtly, "Look here, I'm going to give you a chance. There's a client of mine looking for a girl your general type. If you do a real good job you may break into the modelling business.

"We can see him this afternoon if we hurry," I said. I picked up my stuff. "Come on. And next time, if you expect favors, don't forget to leave your phone number."

"Uh, uh," she said, not moving.

"What do you mean?" I said.

"I'm not going to see any client of yours."

"The hell you aren't," I said. "You little nut, I'm giving you a break."

She shook her head slowly. "You're not fooling me, baby, you're not fooling me at all. They *want* me." And she gave me the second smile.

At the time I thought she must have seen my newspaper ad. Now I'm not so sure.

"And now I'll tell you how we're going to work," she went on. "You aren't going to have my name or address or phone number. Nobody is. And we're going to do all the pictures right here. Just you and me."

You can imagine the roar I raised at that. I was everything angry, sarcastic, patiently explanatory, off my nut, threatening, pleading.

I would have slapped her face off, except it was photographic capital.

In the end all I could do was phone Papa Munsch and tell him her conditions. I know I didn't have a chance, but I had to take it.

He gave me a really angry bawling out, said "no" several times and hung up.

It didn't faze her. "We'll start shooting at ten o'clock tomorrow," she said.

It was just like her, using that corny line from the movie magazines.

About midnight Papa Munsch called me up.

"I don't know what insane asylum you're renting this girl from," he said, "but I'll take her. Come around tomorrow morning and I'll try to get it through your head just how I want the pictures. And I'm glad I got you out of bed!"

After that it was a breeze. Even Mr. Fitch reconsidered and after taking two days to tell me it was quite impossible, he accepted the conditions too.

Of course you're all under the spell of the Girl, so you can't understand how much self-sacrifice it represented on Mr. Fitch's part when he agreed to forego supervising the photography of my model in the Lovelybelt Imp or Vixen or whatever it was we finally used.

Next morning she turned up on time according to her schedule, and we went to work. I'll say one thing for her, she never got tired and she never kicked at the way I fussed over shots. I got along okay except I still had that feeling of something being shoved away gently. Maybe you've felt it just a little, looking at her picture.

When we finished I found out there were still more rules. It was about the middle of the afternoon I started down with her to get a sandwich and coffee.

"Uh uh," she said, "I'm going down alone. And look, baby, if you ever try to follow me, if you ever so much as stick your head out that window when I go, you can hire yourself another model."

You can imagine how all this crazy stuff strained my temper and my imagination. I remember opening the window after she was gone –I waited a few minutes first –and standing there getting some fresh air and trying to figure out what could be back of it, whether she was hiding from the police, or was somebody's ruined daughter, or maybe had got the idea it was smart to be temperamental, or more likely Papa Munsch was right and she was partly nuts.

But I had my pix to finish up.

Looking back it's amazing to think how fast her magic began to take hold of the city after that. Remembering what came after, I'm frightened of what's happening to the whole country and maybe the world. Yesterday I read something in *Time* about the Girl's picture turning up on billboards in Egypt

The rest of my story will help show you why I'm frightened in that big general way. But I have a theory, too, that helps explain, though it's one of those things that's beyond that "certain point."

It's about the Girl. I'll give it to you in a few words.

You know how modern advertising gets everybody's mind set in the same direction, wanting the same things, imagining the same things. And you know the psychologists aren't so sceptical of telepathy as they used to be.

Add up the two ideas. Suppose the identical desires of millions of people focused on one telepathic person. Say a girl. Shaped her in their image.

Imagine her knowing the hiddenmost hungers of millions of men. Imagine her seeing deeper into those hungers than the people that had them, seeing the hatred and the wish for death behind the lust. Imagine her shaping herself in that complete image, keeping herself as aloof as marble. Yet imagine the hunger she might feel in answer to their hunger.

But that's getting a long way from the facts of my story. And some of those facts are darn solid. Like money. We made money.

That was the funny thing I was going to tell you. I was afraid the Girl was going to hold me up. She really had me over a barrel, you know.

But she didn't ask for anything but the regular rates. Later on I insisted on pushing more money at her, a whole lot. But she always took it with that same contemptuous look, as if she were going to toss it down the first drain when she got outside.

Maybe she did.

At any rate, I had money. For the first time in months I had money enough to get drunk, buy new clothes, take taxi-cabs. I could make a play for any girl I wanted to. I only had to pick.

And so of course I had to go and pick

But first let me tell you about Papa Munsch.

Papa Munsch wasn't the first of the boys to try to meet my model but I think he was the first to really go soft on her. I could watch the change in his eyes as he looked at her pictures. They began to get sentimental, reverent. Mama Munsch had been dead for two years.

He was smart about the way he planned it. He got me to drop some information which told him when she came to work, and then one morning he came pounding up the stairs a few minutes before.

"I've got to see her, Dave," he told me.

I argued with him, I kidded him, I explained he didn't know just how serious she was about her crazy ideas. I pointed out he

was cutting both our throats. I even amazed myself by bawling him out.

He didn't take any of it in his usual way. He just kept repeating, "But, Dave, I've got to see her."

The street door slammed.

"That's her," I said, lowering my voice. "You've got to get out."

He wouldn't, so I shoved him in the darkroom. "And keep quiet," I whispered. "I'll tell her I can't work today."

I knew he'd try to look at her and probably come busting in, but there wasn't anything else I could do.

The footsteps came to the fourth floor. But she never showed at the door. I got uneasy.

"Get that bum out of there!" she yelled suddenly from beyond the door. Not very loud, but in her commonest voice

"I'm going up to the next landing," she said. "And if that fat-bellied bum doesn't march straight down to the street, he'll never get another pix of me except spitting in his lousy beer."

Papa Munsch came out of the darkroom. He was white. He didn't look at me as he went out. He never looked at her pictures in front of me again.

That was Papa Munsch. Now it's me I'm telling about. I talked about the subject with her, I hinted, eventually I made my pass.

She lifted my hand off her as if it were a damp rag.

"Nix, baby," she said. "This is working time "

"But afterwards . . ." I pressed.

"The rules still hold." And I got what I think was the fifth smile.

It's hard to believe, but she never budged an inch from that crazy line. I mustn't make a pass at her in the office, because our work was very important and she loved it and there mustn't be any distractions. And I couldn't see her anywhere else, because if I tried to, I'd never snap another picture of her— and all this with more money coming in all the time and me never so stupid as to think my photography had anything to do with it.

Of course I wouldn't have been human if I hadn't made more passes But they always got the wet-rag treatment and there weren't any more smiles.

I changed. I went sort of crazy and light-headed only sometimes I felt my head was going to burst. And I started to talk to her all the time. About myself.

It was like being in a constant delirium that never interfered with business. I didn't pay attention to the dizzy feeling. It seemed natural.

I'd walk around and for a moment the reflector would look like a sheet of white-hot steel, or the shadows would seem like armies of moths, or the camera would be a big black coal car. But the next instant they'd come all right again.

I think sometimes I was scared to death of her. She'd seem the strangest, horriblest person in the world. But other times . . .

And I talked. It didn't matter what I was doing—lighting her, posing her, fussing with props, snapping my pix or where she was—on the platform, behind the screen, relaxing with a magazine—I kept up a steady gab.

I told her everything I knew about myself. I told her about my first girl. I told her about my brother Bob's bicycle. I told her about running away on a freight and the licking Pa gave me when I came home. I told her about shipping to South America and the blue sky at night. I told her about Betty. I told her about my mother dying of cancer. I told her about being beaten up in a fight in an alley behind a bar. I told her about Mildred. I told her about the first picture I ever sold. I told her how Chicago looked from a sailboat. I told her about the longest drunk I was ever on. I told her about Marsh-Mason. I told her about Gwen. I told her about how I met Papa Munsch. I told her about hunting her. I told her about how I felt now.

She never paid the slightest attention to what I said. I couldn't even tell if she heard me.

It was when we were getting our first nibble from national advertisers that I decided to follow her when she went home.

Wait, I can place it better than that. Something you'll remember from the out-of-town papers those maybe-murders I mentioned. I think there were six.

I say "maybe" because the police could never be sure they weren't heart attacks. But there's bound to be suspicion when heart attacks happen to people whose hearts have been okay, and always at night when they're alone and away from home and there's a question of what they were doing.

The six deaths created one of those "mystery poisoner" scares. And afterwards there was a feeling that they hadn't really stopped, but were being continued in a less suspicious way.

That's one of the things that scares me now.

But at that time my only feeling was relief that I'd decided to follow her.

I made her work until dark one afternoon. I didn't need any excuses, we were snowed under with orders. I waited until the street door slammed, then I ran down. I was wearing rubber-soled shoes. I'd slipped on a dark coat she'd never seen me in, and a dark hat.

I stood in the doorway until I spotted her. She was walking by Ardleigh Park towards the heart of town. It was one of those warm fall nights. I followed her on the other side of the street. My idea for tonight was just to find out where she lived. That would give me a hold on her.

She stopped in front of a display window of Everly's department store, standing back from the glow. She stood there looking in.

I remembered we'd done a big photograph of her for Everly's, to make a flat model for a lingerie display. That was what she was looking at.

At the time it seemed all right to me that she should adore herself, if that was what she was doing.

When people passed she'd turn away a little or drift back farther into the shadows.

Then a man came by alone. I couldn't see his face very well, but he looked middle-aged. He stopped and stood looking in the window.

She came out of the shadows and stepped up beside him.

How would you boys feel if you were looking at a poster of the Girl and suddenly she was there beside you, her arm linked with yours?

This fellow's reaction showed plain as day. A crazy dream had come to life for him.

They talked for a moment. Then he waved a taxi to the curb They got in and drove off.

I got drunk that night. It was almost as if she'd known I was following her and had picked that way to hurt me. Maybe she had. Maybe this was the finish.

But the next morning she turned up at the usual time and I was back in the delirium, only now with some new angles added.

That night when I followed her she picked a spot under a street lamp, opposite one of the Munsch Girl billboards.

Now it frightens me to think of her lurking that way.

After about twenty minutes a convertible slowed down going past her, backed up, swung in to the curb.

I was closer this time. I got a good look at the fellow's face. He was a little younger, about my age.

Next morning the same face looked up at me from the front page of the paper. The convertible had been found parked on a side street. He had been in it. As in the other maybe-murders, the cause of death was uncertain.

All kinds of thoughts were spinning in my head that day, but there were only two things I knew for sure. That I'd got the first real offer from a national advertiser, and that I was going to take the Girl's arm and walk down the stairs with her when we quit work.

She didn't seem surprised. "You know what you're doing?" she said.

"I know."

She smiled. "I was wondering when you'd get around to it."

I began to feel good. I was kissing everything good-bye, but I had my arm around hers.

It was another of those warm fall evenings. We cut across into Ardleigh Park. It was dark there, but all around the sky was a sallow pink from the advertising signs.

We walked for a long time in the park. She didn't say anything and she didn't look at me, but I could see her lips twitching and after a while her hand tightened on my arm.

We stopped. We'd been walking across the grass. She dropped down and pulled me after her. She put her hands on my shoulders. I was looking down at her face. It was the faintest sallow pink from the glow in the sky. The hungry eyes were dark smudges.

I was fumbling with her blouse. She took my hand away, not like she had in the studio "I don't want that," she said.

First I'll tell you what I did afterwards. Then I'll tell you why I did it. Then I'll tell you what she said.

What I did was run away. I don't remember all of that because I was dizzy, and the pink sky was swinging against the dark trees. But after a while I staggered into the lights of the street The next day I closed up the studio. The telephone was ringing when I locked the door and there were unopened letters on the floor. I never saw the Girl again in the flesh, if that's the right word.

I did it because I didn't want to die. I didn't want the life drawn out of me. There are vampires and vampires, and the ones that suck blood aren't the worst. If it hadn't been for the warning of those dizzy flashes, and Papa Munsch and the face in the morning paper, I'd have gone the way the others did. But I

realized what I was up against while there was still time to tear myself away I realized that wherever she came from, whatever shaped her, she's the quintessence of the horror behind the bright billboard. She's the smile that tricks you into throwing away your money and your life. She's the eyes that lead you on and on, and then show you death. She's the creature you give everything for and never really get. She's the being that takes everything you've got and gives nothing in return. When you yearn towards her face on the billboards, remember that. She's the lure. She's the bait. She's the Girl

And this is what she said, "I want you. I want your high spots. I want everything that's made you happy and everything that's hurt you bad. I want your first girl. I want that shiny bicycle. I want that licking. I want that pinhole camera. I want Betty's legs. I want the blue sky filled with stars. I want your mother's death. I want your blood on the cobblestones. I want Mildred's mouth. I want the first picture you sold. I want the lights of Chicago. I want the gin. I want Gwen's hands. I want your wanting me. I want your life. Feed me, baby, feed me "

A Bit of the Dark World

I

"There was a crack in his head and a little bit of the Dark World came through and pressed him to death."
Rudyard Kipling in *The Phantom 'Rickshaw*

THE ANTIQUE-SEEMING dip-nosed black Volks touring car with its driver and two other passengers besides myself was buzzing up a saddle ridge of the Santa Monica Mountains, swinging close past the squat brush-choked peaks with their strange upjutting worn rocky pinnacles that looked like primeval monoliths or robed and hooded stone monsters.

We were moving with top down and slowly enough to glimpse sharply the occasional little pale lizard skitter or grasshopper whir up out of our way over the grey crushed stone. Once a shaggy grey cat—which Viki, clutching my arm in mock alarm, insisted was a wildcat—trotted across the narrow road ahead and disappeared in the dry aromatic underbrush. The whole area was a perfect fire hazard and none of us needed to be reminded of the no-cigarette rule.

It was a brilliantly clear day with compact clouds that emphasized the dizzying inverted depth of the blue sky. Between clouds, the sun was dazzlingly bright. More than once, as we headed straight towards the low-trending distant incandescent orb along a switchback stretch, I was stung by its beams and suffered the penalty of black patches swimming in my vision for a minute or so. Next time we'd all remember sunglasses.

We had met only two cars and glimpsed only half a dozen houses and cabins since leaving the Pacific Coast Highway — a remarkable loneliness considering that Los Angeles was a scant hour's drive behind us. It was a loneliness that had drawn Viki and myself apart with its silent intimations of mysteries and revelations, but not yet driven us together again by reason of its menace.

Franz Kinzman, sitting in front to the left, and his neighbour who had volunteered to do this stretch of the driving (a Mr. Morton or Morgan or Mortenson, I wasn't sure) seemed less affected by the landscape, as one would expect seeing they were both rather more familiar with it than Viki or I. Though it was hard to gauge reactions merely from the attitude of the back of Franz's close-cropped grey head or Mr. M.'s faded brown duck hat pulled low to shade his eyes.

We had just passed that point of the Little Sycamore Canyon road where all the Santa Barbara Islands – Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, even distant San Miguel — are visible like an argosy of blue-grey, faintly granular clouds floating on the surface of the pale blue Pacific, when I suddenly remarked, for no profound major reason that I was aware of at the time, "I don't suppose it's any longer possible today to write a truly gripping story of supernatural horror — or for that matter to undergo a deeply disturbing experience of supernatural terror."

Oh, there were enough minor reasons for the topic of my remark. Viki and I had worked in a couple of cheap "monster" movies, Franz Kinzman was a distinguished science-fantasy writer as well as a research psychologist, and the three of us had often gabbed about the weird in life and art. Also, there had been the faintest hint of mystery in Franz's invitation to Viki and myself to spend with him the weekend of his return to Rim House after a month in LA. Finally, the abrupt transition from a teeming city to a forbidding expanse of nature always has an eerie sting—as Franz immediately brought up without turning his head.

"I'll tell you the first condition for such an experience," he said as the Volks entered a cool band of shadow. "You've got to get away from the Hive."

"The Hive?" Viki questioned, understanding very well what he meant, I was sure, but wanting to hear him talk and have him turn his head.

Franz obliged. He has a singularly handsome, thoughtful, *noble* face, hardly of our times, though looking all of his fifty years and with eyes dark-circled ever since the death of his wife and two sons in a jet crash a year ago.

"I mean the City," he said as we buzzed into the sun again. "The human stamping ground, where we've policemen to guard us and psychiatrists to monitor our minds and neighbors to jabber at us and where our ears are so full of the clack of the mass media that it's practically impossible to think or sense or feel anything deeply, anything that's beyond humanity. Today the City, in its figurative sense, covers the whole world and the seas and by anticipation the spaceways. I think what you mean, Glenn, is that it's hard to get out of the City even in the wilderness."

Mr. M. honked twice at a blind hairpin turn and put in the next remark. "I don't know about that," he said, hunching determinedly over the wheel, "but I should think you could find all the horror and terror you wanted, Mr. Seabury, without going away from home, though it'd make pretty grim films. I mean the Nazi death camps, brain-washing, Black-Dahlia sex murders, race riots, stuff like that, not to mention Hiroshima."

"Right," I countered, "but I'm talking about supernatural horror, which is almost the antithesis of even the worst human violence and cruelty. Hauntings, the suspension of scientific law, the intrusion of the utterly alien, the sense of something listening at the rim of the cosmos or scratching faintly at the other side of the sky."

As I said that, Franz looked around at me sharply with what seemed an expression of sudden excitement and apprehension, but at that moment the sun blinded me again and Viki said, "Doesn't science fiction give you that, Glenn? I mean, horrors from other planets, the extraterrestrial monster?"

"No," I told her, blinking at a fuzzy black globe that crawled across the mountains, "because the monster from Mars or wherever has (at least as visualized by the author) so many extra feet, so many tentacles, so many purple eyes—as real as the cop

on the beat. Or if he's a gas, he's a describable gas. The exact sort of goon that men will be meeting when the spaceships start travelling the starways. I'm thinking of something... well... ghostly, utterly weird."

"And it's that thing, Glenn -that ghostly, utterly weird thing that you believe can't be written about effectively any more, or experienced?" Franz asked me with an odd note of suppressed eagerness, eyeing me keenly although the Volks was travelling a jouncy section. "Why?"

"You started to sketch the reasons yourself a moment ago," I said. My newest black globe was slipping sideways now, pulsing, starting to fade. "We've become too smart and shrewd and sophisticated to be scared by fantasies. Most especially we've got an army of experts to explain away the supernatural sort of thing the instant it starts to happen. The physicist boys have put matter and energy through the finest sieves there's no room left in it for mysterious rays and influences, except for the ones they've described and cataloged. The astronomers are keeping tabs on the rim of the cosmos with their giant telescopes. The earth's been pretty thoroughly explored, enough to show there aren't any lost worlds in darkest Africa or Mountains of Madness near the South Pole."

"What about religion?" Viki suggested.

"Most religions," I replied, "steer away from the supernatural today—at least the religions that would attract an intellectual person. They concentrate on brotherhood, social service, moral leadership –or dictatorship! –and fine-drawn reconciliations of theology to the facts of science. They're not really interested in miracles or devils."

"Well, the occult then," Viki persisted. "Psionics."

"Nothing much there either," I asserted. "If you *do* decide to go in for telepathy, ESP, hauntings the supernatural sort of thing you find that territory has all been staked out by Doctor Rhine, riffling his eternal Zenter cards, and a bunch of other parapsychologists who tell you they've got the whole benign spirit world firmly in hand and who are as busy classifying and file-carding as the physicists.

"But worst of all," I went on, as Mr. M. slowed the Volks for a potholed uphill stretch, "we've got seventy-seven breeds of certified psychiatrists and psychologists (excuse me, Franz!) all set to explain the least eerie feeling or sense of wonder we get in terms of the workings of our unconscious minds, our everyday

human relationships, and our past emotional experiences."

Viki chuckled throatily and put in. "Supernatural dread almost always turns out to be nothing but childhood misconceptions and fears about sex. Mom's the witch with her breasts of mystery and her underground baby-factory, while the dark hot bristly demon dissolves to Dear Old Dad." At that moment the Volks, avoiding another dark spill of gravel, again aimed almost straight at the sun. I dodged it in part but Viki got it full in the eyes, as I could tell from the odd way she was blinking sideways at the turreted hills a moment later.

"Exactly," I told her. "The point is, Franz, that these experts *are* experts, all joking aside, and they've divvied up the outer and inner worlds between them, and if we just start to notice something strange we turn to them at once (either actually or in our imaginations) and they have rational down-to-earth explanations all ready. And because each of the experts knows a *lot* more about his special field than we do, we have to accept their explanations — or else go off our own merry way, knowing in our heart of hearts that we're behaving like stubborn romantic adolescents or out-and-out crackpots.

"The result is," I finished, as the Volks got past the potholes, "that there's no room left in the world for the weird — though plenty for crude, contemptuous, wisecracking, fun-poking imitations of it, as shown by the floods of corny 'monster' films and the stacks of monster and madness magazines with their fractionally-educated hip cackling and beatnik jeers."

"Laughing in the dark," Franz said lightly, looking back where the thin dust the Volks raised was falling over the cliff towards the thorny dark ravines far below.

"Meaning?" Viki asked.

"People still are afraid," he stated simply, "and of the same things. They've just got more defenses against their fears. They've learned to talk louder and faster and smarter and funnier — *and* with more parroted expert-given authority — to shut their fears out. Why, I could tell you —" He checked himself. He really did seem intensely excited beneath the calm philosopher's mask. "I can make it clear," he said, "by an analogy."

"Do," Viki urged.

Half turned in his seat, Franz looked straight back at the two of us. A quarter of a mile ahead or so the road, climbing a little again, plunged into a stretch of heavy cloud-shadow. I noted

with relief—I now had no less than three dark fuzzy globes crawling along the horizon and I yearned to be out of the sun. From the way Viki was squinting I could tell she was in the same fix. Mr. M. with his pulled-down hat and Franz, faced around, seemed less affected.

Franz said, "Imagine that mankind is just one man—and his family—living in a house in a clearing in the midst of a dark, dangerous forest, largely unknown, largely unexplored. While he works and while he rests, while he makes love to his wife or plays with his children, he's always keeping an eye on that forest.

"After a while he becomes prosperous enough to hire guards to watch the forest for him, men trained in scouting and woodcraft—your experts, Glenn. The man comes to depend on them for his safety, he defers to their judgment, he is perfectly willing to admit that each of them knows a little more about one small nearby sector of the forest than he does.

"But what if those guards should all come to him one day and say, 'Look, Master, there really is no forest out there at all, only some farmlands we're cultivating that stretch to the ends of the universe. In fact there never was a forest out there at all, Master—you imagined all those black trees and choked aisles because you were scared of the witchdoctor!'

"Would the man believe them? Would he have the faintest justification for believing them? Or would he simply decide that his hired guards, vain of their little skills and scoutings, had developed delusions of omniscience?"

The cloud-shadow was very close now, just at the top of the slight climb we'd almost finished. Franz Kinzman leaned closer to us against the back of the front seat and there was a hush in his voice as he said, "The dark dangerous forest is still there, my friends. Beyond the space of the astronauts and the astronomers, beyond the dark, tangled regions of Freudian and Jungian psychiatry, beyond the dubious psi-realms of Dr. Rhine, beyond the areas policed by the commissars and priests and motivations-research men, far far beyond the mad, beat, half-hysterical laughter... the utterly unknown still *is* and the eerie and ghostly lurk, as much wrapped in mystery as ever."

With an exhilarating chilling and glooming, the Volks rolled into the sharply-edged cloud-shadow. Switching around in his seat Franz began eagerly, instantly, rapidly to search the landscape ahead, which seemed suddenly to expand, gain depth, and spring into sharper existence with the screening off of the blinding sun.

Almost at once his gaze fixed on a smoothly ridged grey stone pinnacle that had just come into view on the opposite rim of the canyon valley beside us. He slapped Mr. M. on the shoulder and pointed with his other hand at a small parking area, surfaced like the road, on the hillside bulge we were crossing.

Then, as Mr. M. swung the car to a grating stop in the indicated area just on the brink of the drop, Franz raised himself in his seat and looking over the windshield, pointed commandingly at the grey pinnacle while lifting his other hand a little, fingers tautly spread, in a gesture enjoining silence.

I looked at the pinnacle. At first I saw nothing but the half-dozen rounded merging turrets of grey rock springing out of the brush-covered hilltop Then it seemed that the last of my annoying after-images of the sun –dark, pulsing, fringe-edged had found lodgement there.

I blinked and swung my eyes a little to make it go away or at least move off –after all it was nothing but a fading disturbance in my retina that, purely by chance, momentarily coincided with the pinnacle.

It would not move away. It clung to the pinnacle, a dark translucent pulsing shape, as if held there by some incredible magnetic attraction.

I shivered. I felt all my muscles faintly chill and tighten at this unnatural linkage between the space inside my head and the space outside it, at this weird tie between the sort of figures that one sees in the real world and the kind that swim before the eyes when one closes them in the dark.

I blinked my eyes harder, swung my head from side to side.

It was no use. The shaggy dark shape with the strange lines going out from it clung to the pinnacle like some giant clawed and crouching beast.

And instead of fading it now began to darken further, even to blacken, the faint lines got a black glitter, the whole thing began horridly to take on a definite appearance and expression, much as the figures we see swimming in the dark become faces or masks or muzzles or forms in response to our veering imagination –though now I felt no ability whatever to change the trend of the shaping of the thing on the pinnacle.

Viki's fingers dug into my arm with painful force. Without realizing it, we'd both stood up in the back of the car and were leaning forward, close to Franz. My own hands gripped the back of the front seat. Only Mr. M. hadn't raised up, though he was staring at the pinnacle too.

Viki began, in a slow rasping strained voice, "Why, it looks like—"

With a sharp jerk of his spread-fingered hand Franz commanded her to be silent. Then without taking his eyes away from the crag he dipped in the side pocket of his coat and was next reaching things back toward us.

I saw, without looking at them directly, that they were blank white cards and stub pencils. Viki and I took them so did Mr. M.

Franz whispered hoarsely, "Don't say what you see. Write it down. Just your impressions. Now, quickly. The thing won't last long—I think."

For the next few seconds the four of us looked and scribbled and shivered at least I know *I* was shuddering at one point, though not for an instant taking my eyes away.

Then, for me, the pinnacle was suddenly bare. I knew that it must have become so for the others too at almost the same instant, from the way their shoulders slumped and the strained sigh Viki gave.

We didn't say a word, just breathed hard for a moment or so, then passed the cards around and read them. Most of the writing or printing had the big sloppiness of something scribbled without looking at the paper, but beyond that there was a visible tremor or shakiness, especially in Viki's notes and my own.

Viki Quinn's:
Black tiger, burning bright. Blinding fur or vines.
Stickiness.
Franz Kinzman's:
Black Empress. Glittering cloak of threads.
Visual glue.
Mine (Glenn Seabury's):
Giant Spider Black lighthouse. The web. The pull on the eyes.
Mr. M., whose writing was firmest:
I don't see anything. Except three people looking at a bare grey rock as if it were the door to Hell.

And it was Mr. M. who first looked up. We met his gaze. His lips sketched a tentative grin that seemed both sour and uneasy

He said after a bit, "Well, you certainly had your young friends pretty well hypnotized, Mr. Kinzman."

Franz asked calmly, "Is that your explanation, Ed –

hypnotic suggestion — for what happened, for what we thought happened?"

The other shrugged. "What else?" he asked more cheerfully. "Do you have another explanation, Franz?—something that would account for it not working on me?"

Franz hesitated. I hung on his answer, wild to know if he'd known it was coming, as he'd seemed to, and how he'd known, and whether he'd had any comparable previous experiences. The hypnotism notion, though clever, was pure nonsense.

Finally Franz shood his head and said firmly, "No."

Mr. M. shrugged and started the Volks.

None of us wanted to talk. The experience was still with us, pinning us down inside, and then the testimony of the cards was so complete in its way, the parallelisms so exact, the conviction of a shared experience so sure, that there was no great immediate urge to compare notes.

Viki did say to me, in the offhand way of a person checking a point of which he's almost certain, "'Black Lighthouse' — that means the light was black? Rays of darkness?"

"Of course," I told her and then asked in the same way, "Your 'vines', Viki, your 'threads', Franz — did they suggest those fine wire figures of curved planes and space you see in mathematical museums? Something linking a center to infinity?"

They both nodded. I said, "Like my web," and that was all the talk for a bit.

I took out a cigarette, remembered, and shoved it back in my top pocket.

Viki said, "Our descriptions . . . vaguely like descriptions of tarot cards . . none of them actual tarots, though. ." Her remarks trailed off unanswered.

Mr. M. stopped at the top of a narrow drive that led down sharply to a house of which the only visible part was the flat roof, topped by pale jagged gravel. He jumped out.

"Thanks for the lift, Franz," he said. "Remember to call on me — the phone's working again—if you people should need a lift in my car . . . or anything." He looked quickly towards the two of us in the back seat and grinned nervously. "Good-bye, Miss Quinn, Mr. Seabury. Don't — " he broke off, said simply, "So long," and walked rapidly down the drive.

Of course we guessed he'd been going to say, "Don't see any more black tigers with eight legs and lady's faces," or something like that.

Franz slid across into the driver's seat. As soon as the Volks

got moving I knew one reason the steady competent Mr. M. might have wanted to drive the mountainous stretch. Franz didn't exactly try to make the old Volks behave like a sports car, but his handling of it was in that direction—skittish, a bit dashing.

He mused aloud, "One thing keeps nagging me: Why didn't Ed Mortenson see it? if 'see' is the right word."

So at last I was sure of Mr. M.'s name. It seemed a triumph. Viki said, "I can think of one possible reason, Mr. Kinzman. He isn't going where we're going."

II

"Imagine one of the awful bird-catching spiders of South America translated into human form, and endowed with intelligence just less than human, and you will have some faint conception of the terror inspired by this appalling effigy."

M. R. James in *Canon Alberic's Scrapbook*

Rim House was about two miles beyond Mr. Mortenson's place and likewise on the downhill (down-cliff, rather!) side of the road. It was reached by a decidedly one-lane drive. On the outside of the drive, edged by white-painted stones, was a near-vertical drop of over one hundred feet. On the inside was a forty-five degree brush-dotted rocky slope between the drive and the road, which was climbing sharply along this stretch

After about one hundred yards the drive widened to become the short, narrow, jutting plateau or terrace on which stood Rim House, occupying about half the available space. Franz, who had taken the first part of the drive with confident briskness, slowed the Volks to a crawl as soon as the house came in view, so we could scan the outside layout while still somewhat above it

The house was built to the very edge of the drop, which here plunged down further and even more sharply than it had along the drive. On the uphill side of the house, coming down to within two feet of it, was a dizzily expansive slope of raw earth with hardly a thing growing on it, as smoothly geometrical as a little section of the side of a vast brown cone. Along the very top of it a row of short white posts, so distant I couldn't see the cable

joining them, marked the road we had left. The slope looked forty-five degrees to me—these things always look impossibly steep but Franz said it was only thirty a completely stabilized landslide. It had been burned over a year ago in a brush fire that had almost got the house and still more recently there had been some minor slides started by repairs to the road above, accounting for the slope's unvegetated appearance.

The house was long, one-storey, its walls finished in grey asbestos shingles. The nearly flat roof, finished in grey asbestos sheets, sloped gently from the cliff side in. Midway the length of the house was a bend, allowing the house to conform to the curving top of the cliff and dividing it into two equal sections or angles, to call them that. An unroofed porch, lightly railed (Franz called it "the deck") ran along the nearer angle of the house fronting north and thrusting several feet out over the drop, which at this point was three hundred feet.

On the side of the house towards the drive was a flagstone yard big enough to turn a car in and with a lightly roofed carport up against the house on the side away from the drop. As we drove down on to the yard there was a slight *clank* as we crossed a heavy metal plate bridging a small neat ditch that ran along the foot of the raw earth slope, carrying off the water that would come down it and also the water that would drain from the roof—during Southern California's infrequent but sometimes severe winter rains.

Franz backed the car around before we got out. It required four movements swing to the corner of the house where the deck started, back with a sharp turn until the rear wheels were almost in the ditch, forward with a reverse turn until the front wheels were at the cliff edge by the metal bridgelet, then back into the carport until the rear of the car was almost up against a door that Franz told us led to the kitchen.

The three of us got out and Franz led us to the center of the flagged yard for another look around before we went inside. I noticed that some of the grey flags were actually solid rock showing through the light soil cover, indicating that the plateau was not an earth terrace cut by men but a rocky flat-surfaced knob thrusting out of the hillside. It gave me a feeling of security which I especially welcomed because there were other impressions sensations rather—that were distinctly disturbing to me.

They were minor sensations, all of them, barely on the

threshold of awareness. Ordinarily I don't think I'd have noticed them – I don't consider myself a sensitive person – but undoubtedly the strange experience of the thing on the pinnacle had keyed me up. To begin with there was the hint of the nasty smell of burnt linen and with it an odd bitter brassy taste; I don't think I imagined these things, because I noticed Franz wrinkling his nostrils and working his tongue against his teeth. Then there was the feeling of being faintly brushed by threads, cobwebs, or the finest vines, although we were right out in the open and the nearest thing overhead was a cloud a half-mile up. And just as I felt that – the faintest feeling, mind you – I noticed Viki lightly and questingly run her hand across the top of her hair and down the back of her neck in the common gesture of "feeling for a spider."

All this time we were talking off and on – for one thing Franz was telling us about buying Rim House on quite inexpensive terms five years back from the heir of a wealthy surfing and sports-car enthusiast who had run himself off a turn in Decker Canyon.

Finally there were the sounds that were, I thought, breathing on the verge of audibility in the remarkably complete silence that flowed around us when the Volks' motor was cut off. I know that everyone who goes from the city to the country is troubled by sounds, but these were on the unusual side. There was an occasional whistling—too high-pitched for the ear's normal range—and a soft rumbling too low for it. But along with these perhaps fancied vibrations, three times I thought I heard the hissing rattle of fine gravel spilling down. Each time I looked quickly towards the slope, but never could catch the faintest sign of earth on the move, although there was admittedly a lot of slope to be scanned.

The third time I looked up the slope, some clouds had moved aside so that the upper rim of the sun peered back down at me. "Like a golden rifleman drawing a bead" was the grotesque figure of speech that sprang to my mind. I looked hurriedly away. I wanted no more black spots before my eyes for the present. Just then Franz led us up on the deck and into Rim House by the front door.

I was afraid that all the unpleasant sensations would intensify as we got inside – especially somehow the burnt-linen smell and the invisible cobwebs – so I was greatly cheered when instead they all vanished instantly, as though faced-down by the strong

sense of Franz's genial, sympathetic, wide-ranging, highly-civilized personality that the living-room exuded.

It was a long room, narrow at first where it had to give space to the kitchen and utility room and a small bathroom at this end of the house, then broadening out to the full width of the building. There was no empty wall-space, it was completely lined with shelves —half of books, half of statuary, archaeological oddments, scientific instruments, tape recorder, hi-fi set and the like. Near the inner wall, beyond the narrow section, were a big desk, some filing cabinets, and a stand with the phone.

There were no windows looking out on the deck. But just beyond the desk, where the bend in the house came, was a big view window looking out across the canyon at the craggy hills that completely cut off any sight of the Pacific. Facing the view window and close to it was a long couch backed by a long table.

At the end of the living-room a narrow hall led down the middle of the second angle of the house to a door that in turn let out into a most private grassy space that could be used for sunbathing and was just big enough for a badminton court if anyone felt nervy enough to leap about swatting at the bird on the edge of that great drop.

On the side of the hall towards the slope was a big bedroom Franz's and a large bathroom opening into the hall at the end of the house. On the other side were two only slightly smaller bedrooms, each with a view window that could be completely masked by heavy dark drapes. These rooms had been his boys', he remarked casually, but I noted with relief that there were no mementoes or signs whatever left of youthful occupancy: my closet, in fact, had some women's clothes hanging in the back of it. These two bedrooms, which he assigned to Viki and myself, had a connecting door which could be bolted from both sides, but now stood unbolted but shut—a typical indication, albeit a minor one, of Franz's civilized tactfulness: he did not know, or at least did not presume to guess, the exact relationship between Viki and myself, and so left us to make our own arrangements as we saw fit—without any spoken suggestion that we should do so.

Also, each door to the hall had a serviceable bolt Franz clearly believed in privacy for guests —and in each room was a little bowl of silver coins, no collector's items, just current American coinage. Viki asked about that and Franz explained deprecatingly, smiling at his own romanticism, that he'd copied

the old Spanish California custom of the host providing guests with convenience money in that fashion.

Having been introduced to the house, we unloaded the Volks of our trifling luggage and the provisions Franz had picked up in LA. He sighed faintly at the light film of dust that had accumulated everywhere during his month's absence and Viki insisted that we pitch in with him and do a bit of house-cleaning. Franz agreed without too much demurring. I think all of us were eager to work off the edge of this afternoon's experience and get feeling back in the real world again before we talked about it. I know I was.

Franz proved an easy man to help house-clean: thoughtful for his home but not at all fussy or finicky about it. And while wielding broom or mop Viki looked good in her sweater, toreador pants, and highbound sandals: she wears the modern young-female's uniform with style rather than the customary effect of dreary intellectuality mated to a solemnly biologic femaleness.

When we'd done, we sat down in the kitchen with mugs of black coffee: somehow none of us wanted a drink: and listened to Franz's stew simmer.

"You'll want to know," he said without preface, "if I've had any previous eerie experiences up here, if I knew something was apt to happen when I invited you up for the weekend, whether the phenomena—pretentious term, isn't it? seem to be connected with anything in the past of the region or the house or my own past—or with current activities here, including the scientific-military installations of the missile people—and finally whether I have any overall theory to account for them—such as Ed's suggestion about hypnotism."

Viki nodded. He'd adequately stated what was in our minds.

"About that last, Franz," I said abruptly. "When Mr. Mortenson first made that suggestion, I thought it was completely impossible, but now I'm not quite so sure. I don't mean you'd deliberately hypnotize us, but aren't there kinds of self-hypnosis that can be communicated to others? At any rate, the conditions were favourable for suggestion operating—we'd just been talking about the supernatural, there was the sun and its after-images acting as an attention-capturer, then the sudden transition to shadow, and finally you pointing decisively at that pinnacle as if we all had to see something there."

"I don't believe that for one minute, Glenn," Viki said with conviction.

"Neither do I, really," I told her. "After all, the cards indicate we had remarkably similar visions—our descriptions were just different enough to make them convincing and I don't see where that material could have been suggested to us during the trip out or at any earlier time when we were together. Still, the idea of some obscure sort of suggestion has crossed my mind. A blend of highway-hypnosis and sun-hypnosis, maybe? Franz, what were your earlier experiences? I take it there were some?"

He nodded but then looked at us both thoughtfully and said, "I don't think I should tell you about them in any detail, though. Not because I'm afraid of your being sceptical or anything like that, but simply because if I do, and then similar things happen to you, you'll be more likely to feel -and rightly that the power of suggestion may have been at work.

"Still, I ought to answer your questions," he continued. "So here goes, briefly and in a general way. Yes, I had experiences while I was up here alone month before last--some of them like this afternoon's, some of them different. They didn't seem to link up with any particular folklore or occult theory or anything else, yet they frightened me so that I went down to LA and had my eyes checked by a very good oculist and had a psychiatrist and a couple of psychologists I trust give me a thorough checkup. They pronounced me fit and unwarped likewise my eyes. After a month I had myself convinced that everything I'd seen or sensed had been hallucinatory, that I'd simply had a case of nerves, a fit of the horrors, from too much loneliness. I invited you two along partly to avoid restarting the cycle."

"You couldn't have been completely convinced, though," Viki pointed out. "You had those cards and pencils all ready in your pocket."

Franz grinned at the neatly-scored point. "Right," he said. "I was still keeping in mind the off-trail chance and preparing for it. And then when I got in the hills the set of my ideas changed What had seemed completely inconceivable in LA became once more a borderline possibility. Queer. Come on, let's take a turn on the deck—it'll be cool by now."

We took our mugs along. It was moderately cool, all right, most of the canyon-valley had been in the shadow for at least two hours and a faint breeze flowed upward around our ankles. Once I'd got used to being on the edge of the terrific drop I found it exhilarating. Viki must have too, for she leaned over with deliberately showy daring to peer.

The floor of the canyon was choked with dark trees and

undergrowth. This thinned out going up the opposite face until just across from us there was a magnificent upthrusted and folded stratum of pale tan rock that the canyon wall cut in cross-section and showed us like a geology book. Above this fold was more undergrowth, then a series of tan and grey rocks with dark gullies and caves between them, leading by steps to a high grey summit-crag.

The slope behind the house completely cut off the sun from us, of course, but its yellow rays were still striking the tops of the wall across from us, travelling up them as the sun sank. The clouds had blown away east, where a couple were still visible, and none had come from the west to replace them.

In spite of being in a much cheerier "normal mood", I'd braced myself just a bit for the eerie little sensations as we'd come onto the deck, but they weren't there. Which somehow wasn't quite as reassuring as it ought to have been. I made myself admire the variegated rocky wall opposite.

"God, what a view to wake up to every morning!" Viki said enthusiastically. "You can feel the shape of the air and the height of the sky."

"Yes, it's quite a prospect," Franz agreed.

Then they came, the little ones, faint-footed as before, feather-treading the sensory thresholds—the burnt-linen odor, the bitter brassy tang, the brushing of skycy cobwebs, the vibrations not quite sound, the hissing rattling spill of ghost gravel . . . the minor sensations, as I'd named them to myself . .

I knew Viki and Franz were getting them too, simply because they said no more and I could sense them both holding very still . . . and then one of the last rays of the sun must have struck a mirror-surface in the summit-crag, perhaps an outcropping of quartz, for it struck back at me like a golden rapier, making me blink, and then for an instant the beam was glitteringly black and I thought I saw (though nothing like so clearly as I'd seen the black all-knowing spider-centipede on the pinnacle) a black shape black with the queer churning blackness you see only at night with your eyes closed. The shape coiled rapidly down the crag, into the cavern gullies and around the rocks and sank finally and utterly into the undergrowth above the fold and disappeared.

Along the way Viki had grabbed my arm at the elbow and Franz had whipped round to look at us and then looked back.

It was strange. I felt frightened and at the same time eager, on

the edge of marvels and mysteries about to be laid bare. And there had been something quite controlled about the behavior of all of us through it. One fantastically trivial point –none of us had spilled any coffee.

We studied the canyon wall above the fold for about two minutes.

Then Franz said, almost gaily, "Time for dinner. Talk afterwards."

I felt deeply grateful for the instant steadying, shielding, anti-hysterical and, yes, comforting effect of the house as we went back in. I knew it was an ally.

III

"When the hard-boiled rationalist came to consult me for the first time, he was in such a state of panic that not only he himself but I also felt the wind coming over the side of the lunatic asylum!"

Carl Gustav Jung in *Psyche and Symbol*

We accompanied Franz's stew with chunks of dark pumpernickel and pale brick cheese and followed it with fruit and coffee, then took more coffee to the long couch facing the big view window in the living-room. There was a spectral yellow glow in the sky but it faded while we were settling ourselves. Soon the first star to the north glittered faintly –Dubhe perhaps.

"Why is black a frightening color?" Viki put before us.

"Night," Franz said. "Though you'll get an argument as to whether it's a color or absence of color or simply basic sensory field. But is it intrinsically frightening?"

Viki nodded with pursed lips.

I said, "Somehow the phrase 'the black spaces between the stars' has always been an ultimate to me in terror. I can look at the stars without thinking of it, but the phrase gets me."

Viki said, "My ultimate horror is the idea of inky black cracks appearing in things, first in the sidewalk and the sides of houses, then in the furniture and floors and cars and things, finally in the pages of books and people's faces and the blue sky.

The cracks are *inky* black—nothing ever shows."

"As if the universe were a gigantic jigsaw puzzle," I suggested.

"A little like that. Or a Byzantine mosaic. Glittering gold and glittering *black*."

Franz said, "Your picture, Viki, suggests that sense of breaking-up we feel in the modern world. Families, nations, classes, other loyalty groups falling apart. Things changing before you get to know them. Death on the instalment plan or decay by jumps. Instantaneous birth. Something out of nothing. Reality replacing science-fiction so fast that you can't tell which is which. Constant sense of *déjà-vu* —'I was here before but when, how?' Even the possibility that there's no real continuity between events, just inexplicable gaps. And of course every gap every crack means a new perching place for horror."

"It also suggests the fragmentation of knowledge, as somebody called it," I said. "A world too big and complex to grasp in more than patches. Too much for one man. Takes teams of experts—and teams of teams. Each expert has his field, his patch, his piece of the jigsaw puzzle, but between any two pieces is a no-man's land."

"Right, Glenn," Franz said sharply, "and today I think the three of us have plunged into one of the biggest of those no-man's-lands." He hesitated then and said with an odd diffidence, almost embarrassment, "You know, we're going to have to start talking sometime about what we saw—we can't let ourselves be gagged by this fear that anything we say will alter the picture of what the others saw and warp their testimony. Well, about the blackness of this thing or figure or manifestation I saw (I called it 'Black Empress', but Sphinx might have been a better word there was the suggestion of a long tigerish or serpentine body in the midst of the black fringy sunburst)—but about its blackness, now, that blackness was more than anything else like the glimmering dark the eyes see in the absence of light."

"Right," I said.

"Oh, yes," Viki chimed.

"There was a sense," Franz went on, "that the thing was in my eyes, in my head, but also out there on the horizon, on the pinnacle I mean. That it was somehow both subjective in my consciousness—and objective—in the material world—or..."(He hesitated and lowered his voice.)"...or existing in some sort of space more fundamental, more primal and less organized than either of those.

"Why shouldn't there be other kinds of space than those we know?" he went on a shade defensively. "Other chambers in the great universal cave? Men have tried to imagine four, five and more spatial dimensions What's the space inside the atom or the nucleus *feel* like, or the space between the galaxies or beyond any galaxy? Oh, I know the questions I'm asking would be nonsense to most scientists they're questions that don't make sense operationally or referentially, they'd say but those same men can't give us the ghost of an answer to even the question of where and how the space of consciousness exists, how a jelly of nerve cells can support the huge flaming worlds of inner reality—they fob us off with the excuse (legitimate in its way) that science is about things that can be measured and pointed at, and who can measure or point at his thoughts? But consciousness *is* it's the basis we all exist in and start from, it's the basis science starts from, whether or not science can get at it so it's allowable for me to wonder whether there may not be a primal space that's a bridge between consciousness and matter. . and whether the thing we saw may not exist in such a space."

"Maybe there *are* experts for this sort of thing and we're missing them," Viki said seriously. "Not scientists, but mystics and occultists, some of them at any rate—the genuine few among the crowd of fakers. You've got some of their books in your library. I recognized the titles."

Franz shrugged. "I've never found anything in occult literature that seemed to have a bearing. You know, the occult – very much like stories of supernatural horror —is a sort of game. Most religions too. Believe in the game and accept its rules—or the premises of the story and you can have the thrills or whatever it is you're after. Accept the spirit world and you can see ghosts and talk to the dear departed. Accept Heaven and you can have the hope of eternal life and the reassurance of an all-powerful god working on your side. Accept Hell and you can have devils and demons, if that's what you want. Accept —if only for story purposes witchcraft, druidism, shamanism, magic or some modern variant and you can have werewolves, vampires, elementals. Or believe in the influence and power of a grave, an ancient house or monument, a dead religion, or an old stone with an inscription on it and you can have inner things of the same general sort. But I'm thinking of the kind of horror and wonder too, perhaps—that lies beyond any game, that's bigger than any game, that's fettered by no rules, conforms to no man-

made theology, bows to no charms or protective rituals, that strides the world unseen and strikes without warning where it will, much the same as (though it's of a different order of existence than all of these) lightning or the plague or the enemy atom bomb. The sort of horror that the whole fabric of civilization was designed to protect us from and make us forget. The horror about which all man's learning tells us nothing."

I stood up and moved close to the window. There seemed to be quite a few stars now. I tried to make out the big fold of rock in the hillside opposite, but the reflections on the glass got in the way.

"Maybe so," Viki said, "but there are a couple of those books I'd like to look at again. I think they're behind your desk."

"What titles?" Franz asked. "I'll help you find them."

"Meanwhile I'll take a turn on the deck," I said as casually as I could, moving towards the other end of the room. They didn't call after me, but I had the feeling they watched me the whole way.

As soon as I'd pushed through the door—which took a definite effort of will—and shoved it to without quite shutting it behind me—which took another—I became aware of two things: that it was much darker than I'd anticipated—the big view window angled away from the deck and there was no other obvious light source except the stars—; two, that I found the darkness reassuring.

The reason for the latter seemed clear enough: the horror I'd glimpsed was associated with the sun, with blinding sunlight. Now I was safe from that—though if someone unseen should have struck a match in front of my face, the effect on me would have been extreme.

I moved forward by short steps, feeling in front of me with my hands at the level of the rail.

I knew why I'd come out here, I thought. I wanted to test my courage against the thing, whatever it was, illusory or real or something else, inside or outside our minds, or somehow as Franz had suggested, able to move in both regions. But beyond that, I realized now, there was the beginning of a fascination.

My hands touched the rail. I studied the black wall opposite, deliberately looking a little away and then back, as one does to make a faint star or a dim object come clear in the dark. After a bit I could make out a big pale fold and some of the rocks above it, but a couple of minutes' watching convinced me that it was

possible endlessly to see dark shapes crossing it.

I looked up at the heavens. There was no Milky Way yet, but there would be soon, the stars were flashing on so brightly and thickly at this smog-free distance from LA. I saw the Pole Star straight above the dark star-silhouetted summit-crag of the hillside across from me, and the Great Bear and Cassiopeia swinging from it. I felt the bigness of the atmosphere, I got a hint of the stupendous distance between me and the stars, and then - as if my vision could go out in all directions at will, piercing solidity as readily as the dark—I got a lasting, growing, wholly absorbing sense of the universe around me.

Lying behind me, a gently swelling, perfectly rounded section of the earth about a hundred miles high masked off the sun. Africa lay under my right foot through the earth's core, Australia under my left, and it was strange to think of the compressed incandescent stuff that lay between us under earth's cool mantle blindingly glowing plastic metal or ore in a space where there were no eyes to see and no millionth of a free inch in which all that dazzling locked-up light could travel. I sensed the tortured ice of the frigid poles, the squeezed water in the deep seas, the fingers of mounting lava, the raw earth crawling and quivering with an infinitude of questing rootlets and burrowing worms.

Then for moments I felt I looked out glimmeringly through two billion pairs of human eyes, my consciousness running like fuse-fire from mind to mind. For moments more I dimly shared the feelings, the blind pressures and pulls of a billion trillion motes of microscopic life in the air, in the earth, in the bloodstream of man.

Then my consciousness seemed to move swiftly outward from earth in all directions, like an expanding globe of sentient gas I passed the dusty dry mote that was Mars, I glimpsed milkily-banded Saturn with its great thin wheels of jumbled jagged ice. I passed frigid Pluto with its bitter nitrogen snows I thought of how people are like plants —lonely little forts of mind with immense black distances barring them off from each other.

Then the speed of expansion of my consciousness became infinite and my mind was spread thin in the stars of the Milky Way and in the other gauzy star islands beyond it—above, below, to all sides, among the nadir stars as well as those of the zenith and on the trillion trillion planets of those stars I sensed the infinite variety of self-conscious life--naked, clothed,

furred, armour-shelled, and with cells floating free clawed, handed, tentacled, pincered, ciliated, fingered by winds or magnetism—loving, hating, striving, despairing, imagining.

For a while it seemed to me that all these being were joined in a dance that was fiercely joyous, poignantly sensuous, tenderly responsive.

Then the mood darkened and the beings fell apart into a trillion trillion trillion lonely motes locked off forever from each other, sensing only bleak meaninglessness in the cosmos around them, their eyes fixed forward only on universal death

Simultaneously each dimensionless star seemed to become for me the vast sun it was, beating incandescently on the platform where my body stood and on the house behind it and the beings in it and on my body too, ageing them with the glare of a billion desert moons, crumbling them all to dust in one coruscatingly blinding instant.

Hands gently grasped my shoulders and at the same time Franz's voice said, "Steady, Glenn." I held still, though for a moment every nerve cell in me seemed on the verge of triggering, then I let out an uneven breath edged with laughter and turned and said in a voice that sounded to me quite dull, almost drugged, "I got lost in my imagination. For a minute there I seemed to be seeing everything. Where's Viki?"

"Inside leafing through *The Symbolism of the Tarot* and a couple of other books on the arcana of the fortune-telling cards, and grumbling that they don't have indexes. But what's this 'seeing everything', Glenn?"

Haltingly I tried to tell him about my "vision", not conveying a hundredth of it, I felt. By the time I finished I could see the blur of his face against the black wall of the house barely well enough to tell that he nodded.

"The universe fondling and devouring her children," his brooding comment came out of the dark. "I imagine you've run across in your reading, Glenn, the superficially sterile theory that the whole universe is in some sense alive or at least aware. There are lots of terms for it in the jargon of metaphysics: cosmotheism, theopantism, panpsychism, panpneumatism - but simply pantheism is the commonest. The idea that the universe is God, though for me God isn't the right term, it's been used to mean too many things. If you insist on a religious approach, perhaps what comes closest is the Greek idea of the Great God Pan, the mysterious nature deity, half animal, that

frightened man and woman to panic in lonely places. Incidentally, panpneumatism is the most interesting to me of the obscurer concepts. old Karl von Hartmann's notion that the unconscious mind is the basic reality — it comes close to what we were saying inside about the possibility of a more fundamental space linking the inner and outer world and perhaps providing a bridge from anywhere to anywhere."

As he paused I heard a faint spill of gravel, then a second, though I got none of the other minor sensations.

"But whatever we call it," Franz went on, "there's something there. I feel — something less than God but more than the collective mind of man — a force, a power, an influence, a mood of things, a something more than sub-atomic particles, that is aware and that has grown with the universe and that helps to shape it." He had moved forward now so that I saw his head silhouetted against the thick stars and for a moment there was the grotesque illusion that it was the stars rather than his mouth that were speaking. "I think there are such influences, Glenn. Atomic particles alone can't sustain the flaming inner worlds of consciousness, there must be a pull from the future as well as a push from the past to keep us moving through time, there must be a ceiling of mind over life as well as a floor of matter beneath it."

Again, as his voice faded out, I heard the feathery hisses of gravel running—two close together, then two more. I thought uneasily of the slope behind the house.

"And if there are those influences," Franz continued, "I believe that man has grown enough in awareness today to be able to contact them without ritual or formula of belief, if they should chance to move or look his way. I think of them as sleepy tigers, Glenn, that mostly purr and dream and look at us through slitted eyes, but occasionally – perhaps when a man gets a hint of them—open their eyes to the full and stalk in his direction. When a man becomes ripe for them, when he's pondered the possibility of them, and then when he's closed his ears to the protective, mechanically-augmented chatter of humanity, they make themselves known to him."

The spills of gravel, still faint as illusions, were coming now in a rapid rhythm like — it occurred to me at that instant — padding footsteps, each footstep dislodging a little earth. I sensed a faint brief glow overhead.

"For they're the same thing, Glenn, as the horror and wonder

I talked about inside, the horror and wonder that lives beyond any game, that strides the world unseen and strikes without warning where it will."

At that instant the silence was ripped by a shrill scream of terror from the flagged yard between the house and the drive. For an instant my muscles were chilled and constricted and there was a gagging pressure in my chest. Then I lunged towards that end of the deck.

Franz darted into the house.

I plunged off the end of the deck, almost fell, twisted to my feet and stopped, suddenly at a loss for my next move.

Here I couldn't see a thing in the blackness. In stumbling I'd lost my sense of direction—for the moment I didn't know which ways were the slope, the house, and the cliff edge.

I heard Viki—I thought it had to be Viki—gasping and sobbing strainingly, but the direction of *that* wouldn't come clear, except it seemed more ahead of me than behind me.

Then I saw, stretching up before me, a half-dozen or so thin close-placed stalks of what I can only describe as a more gleaming blackness—it differed from the background as dead black velvet does from dead black felt. They were barely distinguishable yet very real. I followed them up with my eyes as they mounted against the starfields, almost invisible, like black wires, to where they ended high up in a bulb of darkness, defined only by the patch of stars it obscured, as tiny as the moon.

The black bulb swayed and there was a corresponding rapid joggling in the crowded black stalks—though if they were free to move at the base I ought to call them legs.

A door opened twenty feet from me and a beam of white light struck across the yard, showing a streak of flagstones and the beginning of the drive.

Franz had come out of the kitchen door with a powerful flashlight. My surroundings jumped sideways into place.

The beam swept back along the slope, showing nothing else, then forward towards the cliff edge. When it got to the spot where I'd seen the ribbony black legs, it stopped

There were no stalks, legs or bands of any sort to be seen, but Viki was swaying and struggling there, her dark hair streaming across her face and half obscuring her agonized expression, her elbows tight to her sides, her hands near her shoulders and clawed outward exactly as though she were gripping and

struggling against the vertical bars of a tight cage.

The next instant the tension went out of her, as though whatever she'd been struggling against had vanished. She swayed and began to move in blind tottering steps towards the cliff edge.

That snapped my freeze and I ran towards her, grabbing her wrist as she stepped on the verge, and half-dragged, half-whirled her away from it. She didn't resist. Her movement towards the cliff had been accidental, not suicidal.

She looked at me, one side of her blanched face twitching, and said, "Glenn". My heart was thudding.

Franz yelled at us from the kitchen door, "Come on in!"

IV

> "But the third Sister, who is also the youngest ! Hush! whisper whilst we talk of *her*! Her kingdom is not large, or else no flesh should live; but within that kingdom all power is hers. Her head, turreted like that of Cybele, rises almost beyond the reach of sight She droops not; and her eyes, rising so high, *might* be hidden by distance. But, being what they are, they cannot be hidden... This youngest sister moves with incalculable motions, bounding with a tiger's leaps. She carries no key; for, though coming rarely amongst men, she storms all doors at which she is permitted to enter at all. And her name is *Mater Tenebrarum*, Our Lady of Darkness."
>
> Thomas de Quincy in *Suspira de Profundis*

As soon as we got Viki inside she recovered rapidly from her shock and at once insisted on telling us her story. Her manner was startlingly assured, interested, almost gay, as if some protective door in her mind were already closed against the absolute reality of what had happened.

At one point she even said, "It all still could have been a series of chance little sounds and sights, you know, combined with suggestion working powerfully like the night I saw a burglar standing against the wall beyond the foot of my bed, saw him so clearly in the dark that I could have described him down to the cut of his moustache and the droop of his left eyelid... until the

dawn coming on turned him into my roommate's black overcoat with a tan scarf thrown around the hanger and hook."

While she'd been reading, she said, she'd become aware of the ghost-spills of gravel, some of them seeming to rattle faintly against the back wall of the house, and she'd gone out at once through the kitchen to investigate.

Groping her way, moving a few steps beyond the Volks towards the center of the yard, she had looked towards the slope and at once seen moving across it an incredibly tall wispy shape that she described as "a giant harvestman, tall as ten trees. You know harvestmen, some people call them daddy longlegs, those utterly harmless pitifully fragile spiders that are nothing but a tiny brown inanimate-looking ball with eight bendy legs that are like lengths of stiffened brown thread."

She'd seen it quite clearly in spite of the darkness, because it was "black with a black shimmer". Once it had vanished completely when a car had turned the bend in the road above and its headlights had feebly swept the air high above the slope (that would have been the faint brief overhead glow I'd sensed) but when the headlights swung away the giant black glimmering harvestman had come back at once.

She hadn't been frightened (wonderstruck and terribly curious, rather) until the thing had come treading rapidly towards her, its shimmering black legs drawing closer and closer together until before she realized it they were a tight cage around her.

Then, as she discovered they weren't quite as thin and insubstantial as she'd imagined, and as she felt their feathery, almost bristly touch against her back and face and sides, she'd suddenly snapped and given that one terrific scream and started to struggle hysterically. "Spiders drive me wild," she finished lightly, "and there was the feeling I'd be sucked up the cage to the black brain in the stars -I thought of it as a black brain then, no reason why."

Franz didn't say anything for a bit. Then he began, in a rather heavy, halting way, "You know, I don't think I showed much foresight or consideration when I invited you two up here. Quite the opposite, in fact, even if I didn't then believe that . . . Anyway, I don't feel right about it. Look here, you could take the Volks right now . . . or I could drive . . . and "

"I think I know what you're getting at, Mr. Kinzman, and why," Viki said with a little laugh, standing up, "but I for one

have had quite enough excitement for one night. I have no desire to top it off with watching for ghosts in the headlights for the next two hours." She yawned. "I want to hit that luxurious hay you've provided for me, right this minute. Night-night, Franz, Glenn." With no more word she walked down the hall and went into her bedroom, the far one, and closed the door.

Franz said, in a low voice, "I think you know I meant that very seriously, Glenn. It still might be the best thing."

I said, "Viki's got some kind of inner protection built up now. To get her to leave Rim House, we'd have to break it down. That would be rough."

Franz said, "Better rough, maybe, than what else might happen here tonight."

I said, "So far Rim House has been a protection for us. It's shut things out."

He said, "It didn't shut out the footsteps Viki heard."

I said, remembering my vision of the cosmos, "But Franz, if we're up against the sort of influence we think we are, then it seems to me pretty ridiculous to imagine a few miles of distance or a few bright lights making any more difference to its power than the walls of a house."

He shrugged. "We don't know," he said. "Did you see it, Glenn? Holding the light I didn't see anything."

"Just like Viki described it," I assured him and went on to tell my own little tale. "If that was all suggestion," I said, "it was a pretty fancy variety." I squeezed my eyes and yawned; I was suddenly feeling very dull—reaction, I suppose. I finished, "While it was happening, and later while we were listening to Viki, there certainly were times when all I wanted was to be back in the old familiar world and the old familiar hydrogen bomb hanging over my head and all the rest of that stuff."

"But at the same time weren't you fascinated?" Franz demanded. "Didn't it make you crazy to know more?—the thought that you were seeing something utterly strange and that here was a chance really to understand the universe—at least to meet its unknown lords?"

"I don't know," I told him wearily. "I suppose so, in a way."

"What did the thing really seem like, Glenn?" Franz asked. "What kind of being?—if that's the right word."

"I'm not sure it is," I said. I found it difficult to summon the energy to answer his questions. "Not an animal. Not even an intelligence as we understand it. More like the things we saw on

the pinnacle and the crag." I tried to marshal my fatigue-drugged thoughts. "Halfway between reality and a symbol," I said. "If that means anything."

"But weren't you fascinated?" Franz repeated.

"I don't know," I said, pushing to my feet with an effort. "Look, Franz, I'm too beat to be able to do any more thinking now. It's just too hard to talk about these things. G'night."

"Goodnight, Glenn," he said as I walked to my bedroom. Nothing more.

Midway getting undressed, it occurred to me that my dazed sleepiness might be my mind's defence against having to cope with the unknown, but even that thought wasn't enough to rouse me.

I pulled on my pajamas and put out the light Just then the door to Viki's bedroom opened and she stood there, wearing a light robe.

I had thought of looking in on her, but had decided that if she were sleeping it was the best thing for her and any attempt to check on her might break her inner protections.

But now I could tell from her expression, by the light from her room, that they were shattered.

At the same moment my own inner protection – the false sleepiness—was gone.

Viki closed the door behind her and we moved together and put our arms around each other and stood there. After a while we lay down side by side on the bed under the view window that showed the stars.

Viki and I are lovers, but there wasn't an atom of passion in our embraces now. We were simply two, not so much frightened as completely owerawed, people, seeking comfort and reassurance in each other's presence.

Not that we could hope to get any security, any protection from each other – the thing looming above us was too powerful for that – but only a sense of not being alone, of sharing whatever might happen.

There wasn't the faintest impulse to seek temporary escape in love-making, as we might have done to shut out a more physical threat, the thing was too weird for that. For once Viki's body was beautiful to me in a completely cold abstract way that had no more to do with desire than the colors in an insect's wing-case or the curve of a tree or the glitter of a snowfield. Yet within this strange form, I knew, was a friend.

We didn't speak a word to each other. There were no easy words for most of our thoughts, sometimes no words at all. Besides, we shrank from making the slightest sound, as two mice would while a cat sniffs past the clump of grass in which they are hiding.

For the sense of a presence looming around and over Rim House was overpoweringly strong. Dipping *into* Rim House now too, for all the minor sensations came drifting down on us like near-impalpable snow-flakes—the dark burnt taste and smell, the fluttering cobwebs, the bat-sounds and the wave-sounds and once again the feathery spills of gravel.

And above and behind them the sense of a black uprearing presence linked to the whole cosmos by the finest black filaments that in no way impeded it...

I didn't think of Franz, I hardly thought of the things that had happened today, though now and then I would worry at the edge of a memory...

We simply lay there and held still and looked at the stars. Minute after minute. Hour after hour.

At times we must have slept, I know I did, though blacked-out would be a better expression for it, for there was no rest and waking was a nightmarish business of slowly becoming aware of dark aches and chills.

After a long while I noticed that I could see the clock in the far corner of the room—because its dial was luminescent, I thought. The hands pointed to three o'clock. I gently turned Viki's face towards it and she nodded that she could see it too.

The stars were what was keeping us sane, I told myself, in a world that might dissolve to dust at the faintest breath from the nearer presence.

It was just after I noticed the clock that the stars began to change color, all of them. First they had a violet tinge, which gradually shifted to blue, then green.

In an unimportant corner of my mind I wondered what sort of fine mist or dust drifting through the air could work that change.

The stars turned to dim yellow, to orange, to dark furnace-red, and then—like the last sparks crawling on a sooty chimney wall above a dead fire—winked out.

I thought crazily of the stars all springing away from earth, moving with such impossible swiftness that their light had shifted beneath the red into invisible ranges.

We should have been in utter darkness then, but instead we began to see each other and the things around us outlined by the faintest glimmer. I thought it was the first hint of morning and I suppose Viki did too We looked together at the clock. It was barely four-thirty. We watched the minute hand edge Then we looked back at the window. It wasn't ghostly pale, as it would have been with dawn, but and I could tell that Viki saw this too by the way she gripped my hand it was a pitch-black square framed by the white glimmer.

I could think of no explanation for the glimmer. It was a little like a whiter, paler version of the luminescence of the clock dial. But even more it was like the pictures one imagines in one's eyes in absolute darkness, when one wills the churning white sparks of the retinal field to coalesce into recognizable ghostly forms - it was as if that retinal dark had spilled out of our eyes into the room around us and we were seeing each other and our surroundings not by light but by the power of imagination which each second increased the sense of miracle that the shimmering scene did not dissolve to churning chaos.

We watched the hand of the clock edge towards five. The thought that it must be getting light outside and that something barred us from seeing that light, finally stirred me to move and speak, though the sense of an inhuman inanimate presence was as strong as ever.

"We've got to try and get out of here," I whispered.

Moving across the bedroom like a shimmering ghost, Viki opened the connecting door. The light had been on in her room, I remembered.

There wasn't the faintest glimmer came through the door. Her bedroom was dead black.

I'd fix that, I thought. I switched on the lamp by the bed.

My room became solid black. I couldn't even see the face of the clock. *Light is darkness now,* I thought. *White is black.*

I switched off the light and the glimmer came back. I went to Viki where she was standing by the door and whispered to her to switch off the light in her room. Then I got dressed, mostly feeling around for my clothes, not trusting the ghostly light that was so much like a scene inside my head trembling on the verge of dissolution.

Viki came back. She was even carrying her little overnight bag I inwardly approved the poise that action indicated, but I made no effort to take any of my own things. "My room was very cold," Viki said.

We stepped into the hall. I heard a familiar sound: the whir of a telephone dial. I saw a tall silver figure standing in the living-room. It was a moment before I realized it was Franz, seen by the glimmer. I heard him say, "Hello, operator. Operator!" We walked to him.

He looked at us, holding the receiver to his ear Then he put it down again and said, "Glenn. Viki I've been trying to phone Ed Mortenson, see if the stars changed there, or anything else. But it doesn't work for me. You try your luck at getting the operator, Glenn."

He dialled once, then handed me the receiver. I heard no ringing, no buzz, but a sound like wind wailing softly. "Hello, operator," I said There was no response or change, just that wind sound. "Wait," Franz said softly.

It must have been at least five seconds when my own voice came back to me out of the phone, very faintly, half drowned in the lonely wind, like an echo from the end of the universe "Hello, operator."

My hand shook as I put down the phone. "The radio?" I asked.

"The wind sound," he told me, "all over the dial."

"Just the same we've got to try to get out," I said

"I suppose we should," he said with a faint ambiguous sigh. "I'm ready. Come on."

As I stepped onto the deck after Franz and Viki, I felt the intensified sense of a presence The minor sensations were with us again, but far stronger now: the burnt taste made me gag almost, I wanted to claw at the cobwebs, the impalpable wind moaned and whistled loudly, the ghost-gravel hissed and splashed like the rapids of a river. All in near absolute darkness

I wanted to run but Franz stepped forward to the barely glimmering rail. I held on to myself.

The faintest glimmer showed a few lines of the rock wall opposite. But from the sky above it was beating a dead inkier blackness *blacker than black*, I thought -that was eating up the glimmer everywhere, dimming it moment by moment. And with the inkier blackness came a chill that struck into me like needles.

"Look," Franz said. "It's the sunrise."

"Franz, we've got to get moving," I said.

"In a moment," he answered softly, reaching back his hand. "You go ahead. Start the car. Pull out to the center of the yard.

I'll join you there."

Viki took the keys from him. She's driven a Volks. There was still enough glimmer to see by, though I trusted it less than ever. Viki started the car, then forgot and switched on the headlights. They obscured yard and drive with a fan of blackness. She switched them off and pulled to the center of the yard.

I looked back. Although the air was black with the icy sunlight I could still see Franz clearly by the ghost light He was standing where we'd left him, only leaning forward now, as though eagerly peering.

"Franz!" I called loudly against the weirdly wailing wind and the mounting gravel-roar. "Franz!"

There reared out of the canyon, facing Franz, towering above him, bending towards him a little, a filament-trailing form of shimmering velvet black not the ghost light, but shimmering darkness itself –that looked like a gigantic hooded cobra, or a hooded madonna, or a vast centipede, or a giant figure of the cat-headed goddess Bast, or all or none of these.

I saw the silver of Franz's body begin to crumble and churn. In the same moment the dark form dipped down and enfolded him like the silk-gloved fingers of a colossal black hand or the petals of a vast black flower closing.

Feeling like someone who throws the first shovel of earth on the coffin of a friend, I croaked to Viki to go

There was hardly any glimmer left not enough to see the drive, I thought, as the Volks started up it.

Viki drove fast.

The sound of the spilling gravel grew louder and louder, drowning out the intangible wind, drowning out our motor. It rose to a thunder. Under the moving wheels, being transmitted up through them, I could feel the solid earth shaking.

A bright pit opened ahead of us on the canyon side. For a moment it was as if we were driving through veils of thick smoke, then suddenly Viki was braking, we were turning into the road and early daylight was almost blinding us

But Viki didn't stop. She completed a near-full turn, so we were headed up the Little Sycamore Canyon road.

There was no trace of darkness at all, anywhere. The thunder that had shaken the ground was dying away.

She drove close to the edge where the road turned away at the head of the slope and she stopped the car there.

Around us were the turreted hills The sun hadn't yet climbed

above them but the sky was bright.

We looked down the slope. It was hollowed by the earth it had lost. No dust clouds obscured it anywhere, though there was dust rising now from the bottom of the canyon-valley.

The shrunken slope swept down straight from us to the cliff edge without a break, without a hummock, without one object thrusting up through. *Everything* had been carried away by the slide.

That was the end of Rim House and Franz Kinzman.

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Night's black agents

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